PART I

Shock
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FLASHPOINT: 4 MAY 1919
The Making of a New China

An observer standing by the back wall of an old, attractive house in a back alleyway in Beijing, late in the afternoon of 4 May 1919, would have glimpsed an unusual sight. Sounds of shouting and smashing furniture were emerging from inside the house, which appeared to have been taken over by an enthusiastic group of young people bent on destruction. A man suddenly appeared and jumped over the back wall – one source later suggested that he showed ‘rare agility’, and another claimed that he was wearing a uniform borrowed from a policeman – and landed awkwardly in the street. He was then picked up by attendants and rushed away from the scene.¹

The man who had leaped so nimbly was Cao Rulin, minister of communications in the government of the Republic of China, and it was his house that was being so comprehensively destroyed. The attackers were students from Beijing’s top colleges and universities. Earlier that day, some 3,000 students had gathered in front of the Tian’anmen, the Gate of Heavenly Peace which fronts the Forbidden City complex in the centre of the Chinese capital. The students, from 13 different colleges in the city, had listened to speeches protesting the shameful settlement that China had been forced to accept at the Paris Peace Conference which had ended World War I. Under the terms of the Versailles Treaty, the former German colonies on Chinese territory were not to be given back to China, but would instead be handed over to another imperialist power, Japan. By two o’clock, the students had had enough of speeches. Carrying placards, they started to march towards Beijing’s diplomatic quarter, demanding

justice for China in the international arena. As the students became more heated, they moved on to the house of Cao Rulin, who was regarded as being close politically to the Japanese. After destroying much of the interior of the house, and assaulting visitors whom they found there, some of the demonstrators then set fire to it. At this development, the police moved in, and 32 of the protestors were arrested.²

This sequence of events, which lasted just a few hours, gave rise to a legend. The date of the demonstration, May Fourth, became famous across China. Without the controversial, elusive, infuriating ‘May Fourth Movement’, and the closely related but wider ‘New Culture Movement’, twentieth-century Chinese history would be completely different. Yet the movement is still only sketchily known about or understood outside the world of China specialists, and even the Chinese themselves are locked in combat to this day about the ‘real’ meaning of the heady events and new trends of the early twentieth century. This book examines the different facets of this movement and suggests that its legacy, in varied forms, underpins the whole history of twentieth-century China.

At the time, it was not immediately clear that the events of 4 May 1919 would have such lasting effects. Yet the demonstrations did not emerge spontaneously, but were planned as a powerful political gesture by students angry with a Chinese government they felt had betrayed the interests of the country. Why, then, did the gathering at the Tian’anmen gate and the subsequent destruction of Minister Cao’s house take place?

The trigger had come just a few days previously. On 30 April, news came from Paris, where the Peace Conference had been negotiating on the question of how China should be treated. Educated Chinese such as the students at Peking University had been watching events in Europe carefully, and had good reason to expect that the Versailles settlement would be a turning point for China’s efforts to establish the legitimacy of the new Republic, founded just seven years previously. The government of the Republic did not consist of popular leaders with a mandate, but was rather the product of a seemingly unstoppable series of intrigues between militarist leaders with their

own armies and civilian elites with power over finance and governance. Nonetheless, the governments did employ skilled, often western-educated diplomats who had high hopes of using the Great War in Europe as a means of bolstering China’s position in the world. In 1917, Chinese Prime Minister Duan Qirui’s government decided to let China for the first time enter an international conflict voluntarily, and the Beijing government declared its support for the Allies. Although no Chinese soldier fought in combat, some 96,000 were sent as labourers to the Western Front in Europe, and around 2,000 died there. Such a substantial contribution, China’s patriots felt, would surely result in an appropriate reward: in particular, the return of the ports of Jiaozhou and Qingdao, and part of Shandong province in northern China, all of which had been German colonies. As Germany was to be stripped of its colonies under the Versailles Treaty, China could expect to regain the territories it had lost so unwillingly in the scramble for imperial possessions in China which had marked the late nineteenth century.

But the message from Paris was bleak. China would not regain its territory, and the formerly German areas would instead be handed over to Japan. It emerged that the deal with China was not the only one made by the Allies in 1917. They had also approached Japan, which had agreed to assist the Allies in the Pacific in return for territories in China after the war. The United States, which had entered the war late, was not party to this agreement, and President Woodrow Wilson was at first sympathetic to Chinese protests at Paris with regard to this fait accompli, but when persuaded that the offer to Japan was binding in international law, regretfully declined to intervene against Britain, France, and Italy. Wilson made his position public on 30 April 1919.

Chinese nationalists were outraged. And they took full advantage of the globalized world which China had been forced into entering after its disastrous defeat in the Opium Wars of the 1840s. The news from Paris, thanks to the introduction of telegraphy and newspapers into China, could be transmitted and published within hours, rather than months. Nor were the Chinese themselves confined to China. There had been a large ethnic Chinese diaspora within Asia for
centuries, and this had expanded into the western world in the nineteenth century: as the west forced itself into China, so China engaged with the west. The Chinese labourers on the Western Front had not been their only compatriots in France. There were also many Chinese students, largely from the educated elites, in Paris. When they heard about the humiliating terms of the Treaty, they surrounded the hotel where the Chinese delegates to the Peace Conference were staying and physically prevented them from signing the Treaty. But the most lasting legacy of the Allies’ snub to China would be in the capital city on 4 May 1919, when the students made their protest at the heart of China’s capital, the Tian’anmen gate.

The events of ‘May Fourth’ became well known quickly. However, there were very different interpretations of what they meant. Many of those who participated went on to shape modern China, and looked back on the events of May Fourth as part of their own political and spiritual journeys. One such figure was Luo Jialun, a 22-year-old student at Peking University who coined the term ‘May Fourth Movement’ in a journal article published just a few weeks after the demonstrations. Luo would go on to become President of Qinghua, one of China’s top universities. In an oral memoir set down in 1931, Luo remembered the chain of events that led to the demonstrations on that hot Sunday in May. The previous evening, students had gathered at the Qinghua campus to plan a demonstration against the settlement at the Paris Peace Conference. Feelings ran high, so much so that one student threatened publicly to rebuke the Chinese government by killing himself with a knife which he had brought to the meeting. In the face of this anger, a demonstration which had been planned for the following Wednesday, 7 May, was abandoned in favour of action the very next day, Sunday 4 May. The students hastily cashed in a savings account to buy cloth and bamboo sticks to make banners, drawing on the help of the student calligraphy and art groups at Peking University to write the slogans, and soon had 3,000 banners ready.

The tactics of the demonstration were not invented on the spot. There was a wide range of international examples that educated Chinese of the period could now draw upon, a real change from the
preceding centuries when foreign political ideas were rarely considered by Chinese thinkers. ‘In March and April of that year, the Koreans had carried out an unarmed revolution [against the Japanese colonial occupiers] which greatly inspired all of us,’ Luo recalled, and there was also the example of the ‘revolutionary tide everywhere after the European war [World War I]’. Furthermore, the students of 1919 were acutely conscious of the need to let the outside world know about their rage. ‘On the morning of the second day, we prepared some English-language statements to present to the embassies of various foreign countries.’(This planning foreshadowed events exactly 70 years later, on 4 May 1989. On that date, student demonstrators in the same location, now expanded and renamed Tian’anmen Square, would make sure that their demands were written on placards in English to catch the eye of international television crews.)

Certainly, foreign reporters did not miss their cues in 1919. One journalist, Rodney Gilbert, described the demonstration as ‘a sort of pacific Korean protest, undoubtedly inspired by the reports of Korean methods, in which all classes of Chinese have been taking the clearest interest’. Four

The meeting at the Tian’anmen gate (not at that time located in a square) started at 1 p.m. on Sunday 4 May. The city police came in a little beforehand, demanding that the demonstrators disperse, but were ignored. After speeches from some of the student leaders, the 3,000 or so demonstrators moved off. They went first to the Legation quarter, where foreign diplomats in Beijing were stationed, but after being moved on by the police, the increasingly angry crowd decided instead to gather at the house of Cao Rulin, the minister of communications, who had been judged one of the ‘national traitors’ who had sold out Chinese economic and political sovereignty to Japan. Yet even a foreign reporter who was not sympathetic to the demonstrators noted: ‘There was no shouting and no cheering, and their appearance, after a long tramp in the hot dust and sun, was anything but sinister.’ This made him more surprised at what happened next: ‘They came to Hatamen Street . . . advanced quietly down the hutung [alleyway] to the little side street in which Tsao Ju-lin [Cao Rulin] resides, came to his big double doors – and then went mad.’

1. Hatamen Street in Beijing around 1925.

The house of communications minister Cao Rulin was in one of the small alleys that led off Hatamen Street. On 4 May 1919, an anti-imperialist demonstration by Beijing college students ended up forcing entry to Cao’s house and setting it on fire.
Luo Jialun did not describe the events which followed in terms of madness, but he acknowledged that they were violent:

Cao Rulin’s house was a big residence in the style favoured by the former Manchu imperial family. When we got to the front gate of his house, the front door was already locked, and there was a group of... armed police standing in front. Everybody reached the front door and started cursing the ‘traitor to the country.’ At first people threw their banners on the roof, then someone smashed a window at the side, and everybody climbed in. I saw with my own eyes that the first people to go in were a Peking University student... who was studying natural science and a student... from a college of advanced engineering.6

A small group rushed in after these two, and opened the front door from inside, allowing the rest of the demonstrators to come in. The police protecting Cao were now outnumbered, and the minister himself decided that it was time to make himself scarce. ‘As we were breaking in,’ Luo said, ‘Cao Rulin changed into a policeman’s uniform, melted into the crowd of police, and jumped over the back wall.’ A later report said that he had ‘landed with a badly injured leg in another street, where he was picked up and taken to the sanctuary of a foreign hotel’.7 Less swift was Zhang Zongxiang, the former Chinese minister to Japan, who had been visiting Cao that day along with a Japanese guest, and was now caught by the angry crowd. The Japanese visitor was pelted with eggs obtained from a nearby grocery store, but Zhang was not to be let off so easily. The crowd...

... tore apart an old iron bed, and used the legs of this iron bed to beat him up, so that Zhang really was covered in scars that looked like fish-scales all over his body. Everybody thought that he had actually been killed. Cao’s ornaments, his antiques... all of them were just smashed to pieces, and the many perfume bottles in his wife and daughter’s rooms all were broken into shards on the floor. The smell of the perfume wafted everywhere.8

The demonstrators were not yet satisfied. Luo recalled that he saw a group of students with matches, and suspected that they had had something more than peaceful demonstration on their mind from the start. ‘If they hadn’t intended to [set the house on fire] beforehand,’
he asked, ‘why had they brought quite so many matches along with them?’ As the house went up in flames, the police regrouped and made some arrests, although the majority of the demonstrators sensed that this was the right moment to disappear and melted away into the backstreets.

Foreign observers were dismayed at the day’s events. For a while it was thought that Zhang Zongxiang had been killed, so serious were his wounds, although he did recover and lived on for several decades. The North China Daily News, the most prominent journalistic voice of the British settler community in China, described the day’s happenings as ‘The Peking Riot’. Its editorial chided the Chinese government for allowing this sort of disturbance to take place:

The Peking government has again displayed its weakness, this time by releasing on bail the Chinese students who were arrested in connexion with the burning of Tsao Ju-lin’s house and the murder of the minister to Tokio [who had not, in fact, died]. It is not improbable that the young men who were taken into custody were merely onlookers or less culpable demonstrators. Nevertheless their release . . . cannot but stimulate these young men to further acts of rowdyism, if not of violence. Students in other cities are holding demonstrations . . . and the bad example of the authorities in the Capital may lead to excesses in the provinces.10

For the students and their supporters, the day had a very different significance. No longer would the Chinese be willing to allow ‘national traitors’ to carve up the country between the various imperial powers who wanted to colonize it. Xu Deheng was one of the most prominent of the demonstrators, a student at Peking University aged 29. He was one of those who was arrested and held for a few days after the burning of Cao’s house. Years later, as a high official in the People’s Republic of China, he would declare that ‘the most important characteristic of the May Fourth movement was that it was when the Chinese revolution became a fellow-combatant in the world proletarian revolution.’11 Although this sweeping view of May Fourth’s significance is shaped by hindsight, even on the day itself, Xu had written a poem declaring that the events had been carried out ‘to purge clean the shame from Chinese hearts and
minds’. ‘In ferreting out traitors we’ve spared no cost’, he wrote. ‘We’d do anything to save China.’ In practice, Xu and his fellow-prisoners spent just a few days locked up, as powerful figures, including the President of Peking University, intervened with the authorities to secure their release.

The events of May Fourth showed certain significant characteristics. First, the prime movers behind the demonstration were young students, most of them men, in their twenties. Second, the events were stimulated by developments far outside Chinese territory, shaped by practices learned from the outside world, and were in part carried out so as to catch the attentions of that wider world. Third, the day’s events were violent. The violence was perhaps not premeditated, but the nature of the language and the politics which surrounded the demonstrations had made it easy to translate words into action. The combination of these factors – youth, internationalism, and violence – would shape not just the day of the demonstrations, but much of the path taken by twentieth-century China.

The location of the demonstration was also significant. Within weeks, news of the May Fourth events led to demonstrations, protests, and boycotts all across China’s cities, Shanghai, Hangzhou, and Harbin among them. Yet the Beijing demonstrations which began at the Tian’anmen gate retained a particular significance and prestige, and the date 4 May 1919 has a cultural resonance for educated Chinese that has lasted for the best part of a century. It was no coincidence that students and workers were gathered before the same gate 70 years later on 4 May 1989, their occupation of the square then cut short on the night of 4 June, a month later. A year earlier, in 1988, a prophetic television series, *Heshang* [River Elegy], had warned: ‘It is as if many things in China ought to start afresh from May Fourth.’ It is not just one date that was so important; the date sums up a time, an atmosphere and an energy that have such potency that they inform Chinese politics today, so much so that the Chinese government put up new memorials to May Fourth 1919 at the turn of the new millennium.
2. Demonstration in Canton by students and others against imperialism, 1925.

The May Fourth demonstrations by Beijing students were just one part of a wider movement against foreign imperialism and internal political chaos in the 1910s and 1920s. Students were particularly active in the movement, but radicalized workers and middle-class nationalists played a significant role.

Why was May Fourth Important?

The atmosphere and political mood that emerged around 1919 are at the centre of a set of ideas that has shaped China’s momentous twentieth century. This phenomenon is known as the May Fourth Movement. This book looks at slices of time – broadly speaking, the 1920s, the 1940s, the 1960s, the 1980s, and the turn of the millennium. The societies described in each of these periods are very different, considering that each is only 20 years from the next. In the 1920s, China had only recently seen the 2,000-year-old imperial system collapse, and a fragmented series of militarist governments competed with the imperial powers for control over China’s resources. Twenty years later, China was in the midst of a devastating world war.
which killed tens of millions of its citizens. Forty years later, China had undergone the horrors of the war against Japan and the victory of the Communists only to descend into the bizarre, seemingly anarchic world of Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution. And 60 years after the May Fourth events, the Communist Party, while still in charge, now sanctioned domestic reform and a more tolerant and welcoming attitude towards influence from outside, although the tensions within society led to the showdown at Tian’anmen Square in 1989. As that confrontation fades into history, it is still unclear what China is becoming. Its contradictions include being a state that is communist in name but now more like a corporatist, semi-capitalist state in reality, fuelled by nationalism but also a desire to be seen as a responsible member of international society, and by the hope that the economy will continue to bring prosperity.

Yet these very different Chinese realities over a century reflect a set of ideas that runs like a thread through the many governments and systems that have shaped modern China. These ideas are at the centre of the May Fourth experience, as are the thinkers behind them. In the 1920s, those thinkers included Zou Taofen, Chen Duxiu, Ding Ling, and Lu Xun. In the 1980s, among the important figures were Su Xiaokang, Chen Ziming, and Li Zehou. The later generation did not know their predecessors in person, yet the idea of May Fourth runs through their lives and thoughts, a common thread passed from one generation to another.

There are important reasons why the May Fourth Movement has been the subject of historical and political controversy for nearly a century. Those reasons are embedded in the political development of China. Later, we will trace that development in more detail, but for the moment, an outline is as follows. The impact of western imperialism in China from the 1840s onwards helped to stimulate internal collapse of the ruling Qing dynasty. A revolution deposed the last emperor, and a Chinese republic was declared in 1912. However, the Republic proved unstable, and until 1928 was ruled by a succession of militarist leaders, many of whom controlled only parts of China at any one time. In the early 1920s, the two major political parties, the Nationalist Party (also known as the Kuomintang or KMT) and
Communist Party (known as the Chinese Communist Party or CCP) both became prominent. At first they were allies, particularly during the period of cooperation from 1923 to 1927 coordinated by the Comintern. However, after 1927, the Nationalists managed to declare a unified government based at Nanjing, and purged their Communist allies. The two parties were then bitter enemies, with the partial exception of the period of World War II when they were in uneasy alliance against Japan. The Nationalists grew weaker as the CCP grew stronger, and finally the civil war between them ended with the victory of the CCP in 1949 and the forced departure of the Nationalists to the island of Taiwan. The period from 1949 to 1976 in which Mao was paramount leader in China saw massive social change and redistribution of land and privileges, but also the chaotic campaigns of which the Cultural Revolution was perhaps the most destructive. Mao’s eventual successor, Deng Xiaoping, spent much of the 1980s converting China from a command economy with a controlled employment and welfare system to one that responded more to market pressures, but also chipped away at the guaranteed livelihood that Mao’s China had provided. The 1990s onwards have seen China continue its reforms towards a marketized system, as well as coping with the post-Cold War world where ideological differences have been less important in international relations.

Since the rise of the CCP and the ultimate defeat of the Nationalists, perhaps the most visible narrative in modern Chinese history, were heavily influenced by the events of the 1910s and 1920s, the ‘May Fourth Movement’ and the era that produced it have been discussed fiercely by historians of China since the events that gave it its name. Points of dispute have included who the members of the movement were, its chronology, and even whether it really existed at all.

A standard definition of the movement might well describe it in this way: it was a period from the mid-1910s to the late 1920s or early 1930s when a group of Chinese thinkers felt that something was holding their country back from combating evils such as imperialism and warlordism, even though the old imperial Qing dynasty had been overthrown and a republic established. The answer these thinkers came up with was that traditional Chinese culture, based on the

philosophy of Confucius, was largely to blame. This ancient form of
hierarchical thinking, they felt, was responsible for the callous treat-
ment of the poor, the persistence of patriarchal oppression of women,
and the inability to create a modern nation state.

Later in the book, the topic of Confucianism and its influence will
be dealt with in much greater detail. However, to understand what
the May Fourth Movement and the generation that created the New
Culture were reacting against, it is important to understand the basic
tenets of Confucian thought.

Confucianism was at the basis of Chinese government and society
for some 2,000 years. It is not easily defined by any one set of
books or teachings, nor is it a religion, although it has a spiritual
dimension. Rather, it is an understanding of how society should be
ordered, including behaviour and action both on earth and in the
other world. It originated with the teachings of Confucius (551–479
BCE), a travelling philosopher and teacher who lived during a period
when China was a collection of rival and warring states. Confucius
was disturbed by the violence and lack of morality that he saw
around him, and spent his life trying, not very successfully, to per-
suade rulers to employ him as an adviser on reform. As with Socrates,
the only record we have of Confucius’s thoughts are recollections by
his disciples, recorded in a collection known as the *Analects* [Lunyu].
Reading these, certain themes emerge. The single most important
element in organizing society, Confucius suggested, was *li*, a term
usually translated as ‘ritual’. However, he did not have in mind the
formal and repetitive sort of actions that the term implies in English.
Instead, he used the term to indicate certain acceptable and morally
correct forms of behaviour that would enable people to show their
best qualities. These qualities were expressed in terms which are
known in China to this day as ‘Confucian’ values, *ren*, *yi*, *xiao*, and
*zhong* among them – although again, the English translations as
‘benevolence’, ‘propriety’, ‘filial piety’, and ‘loyalty’, respectively, give
a rather Victorian and musty air to what was supposed to be a rich
cultural repertoire. ‘Order’ became an important element in a society
that followed ‘ritual’ correctly; not just being orderly, but also
arranging things in the right order and creating stability by doing so.

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The purpose of ‘order’ was not to oppress people, but rather to allow moral and ethical behaviour (de) to flourish.

Confucius argued that an ordered and morally correct society would be able to refrain from the use of force. Violence and coercion were deviant and unwelcome, in Confucius’s view. Instead, the morally correct person would aim to become a junzi, a word translated sometimes as ‘gentleman’ or ‘person of integrity’. For society to remain stable, it was also important that correct hierarchies were maintained: servants should obey masters, subjects obey rulers, children obey parents, and women obey men. The qualities of obligation, loyalty, and filial piety were tied into this understanding. However, if a person in authority, whether a ruler, master, or parent, abused his power, then he would also be in violation of the norms of what was right and correct. The idea of the family was vitally important to Confucius. This was true at the most basic level, with parents and children, and was extended by analogy to the level of state; the king stood in a parental relationship to his subjects. The emphasis on family also meant that individualism and putting oneself forward in a brash way was frowned upon as somehow selfish and petty. In addition, Confucian thought did not respect the urge to make money and seek profit. Long after Confucius’s death, when China had been unified into one state, the development of Confucian thought gave the emperor a partial role in the ordering of society. He was considered to be the fulcrum connecting the spiritual world of heaven to the earthly realm, and as such, was central to the hierarchy that underpinned the Chinese empire.

Confucius did not deny the existence of spirits, but his teachings concentrated on the material world. Ancient China developed other religious traditions that were more overtly fixed on the world of gods and supernatural phenomena, including Daoism, and, after its introduction in the second century CE, Buddhism. These were not mutually exclusive belief systems, but coexisted, and it would have been quite normal for people to participate in rites and ceremonies that came from a variety of religious and philosophical backgrounds. This syncretic mixture shaped the lively political and spiritual life of pre-modern China.
Political rulers from the Han dynasty onwards (220 BCE–221 CE) drew upon Confucianism. It was a highly attractive way of thought, since it provided an ethical basis for a strong and stable government. Yet the practice of government, which was often based on the need or desire for force, violence, and conquest, meant that Confucius’s precepts on avoidance of force, or the need for mutual obligation between superiors and inferiors, could not always be followed. Therefore, political philosophers over the centuries adapted Confucian thought to make it more compatible with the realities of statecraft, often retaining harsh and coercive laws while using a rhetoric of persuasion and loyalty. However, the basic tenets that underpinned Confucius’s ideas remained engrained in Chinese minds at all levels of society: the imperial family and the poorest farmers alike believed in the importance of family and obligation to one’s parents (hence the dread in Chinese society of dying without any children to cherish one’s memory) and in the importance of maintaining government that was regarded as benevolent and therefore legitimate.

Nonetheless, China was frequently shaken by instability, even when Confucianism was strong. Peasant uprisings were frequent across the ages, although the successful ones were given retrospective justification, as it was assumed that they had been justifiable revolts against cruel rulers who had broken the Confucian social contract. The most violent challenge to Confucian values, though, was the introduction of two western systems of thought in the nineteenth century: capitalist modernity and Christianity. Part I of this book, and Chapter 4 in particular, goes into detail about how these systems of thought clashed and co-existed in the twentieth century. But put simply, the arrival of the western imperialists and their thought was a catalyst for many Chinese to look again at their own society and assess its faults. Too many people were poor, yet did not rise up against their fate. Women were oppressed – physically, by having their feet bound painfully small, and psychologically, by being treated as social inferiors and being deprived of education. More widely, the Chinese state was clearly in trouble: western barbarians were able to come and invade with impunity. Where did the fault lie for this crisis?
For the most radical thinkers, the only rational response was to declare that Confucian thought had been all-pervasive in China, and therefore Confucian thought was responsible for the country’s present crisis. For these critics, all aspects of China’s Confucian past were pernicious and corrupting, and must be exterminated from Chinese society and culture before the country could truly be saved. As a result, these activists revolutionized the Chinese language, abandoning the old classical written form for a vernacular language, thought about new political systems, and threw off social conventions on traditional relations between men and women. It was a movement particularly associated with young, urban patriots, hence its association with the demonstrations on 4 May 1919. Yet that one day was only a symbol of a much wider change in Chinese society. For that reason, the term ‘New Culture Movement’ is often used almost interchangeably with ‘May Fourth Movement’ in writing about the era. In fact, the two are not identical. The ‘New Culture’ idea emerged in significant part as a protest by elite groups shocked at a particular event: the attempts by the new Republican President, Yuan Shikai, in 1915–16 to restore Confucianism as the basis of the country’s political system and, as part of this, to have himself declared emperor. However, the term ‘new culture’ can be used more widely. When the Chinese thought about their identities, understandings, assumptions, systems of shared comprehension, that whole amorphous web which defines ‘culture’, the May Fourth era stands out as a period of change which was innovative and irreversible.

The terms ‘May Fourth Movement’ and ‘New Culture Movement’ were not invented by historians after the fact. Both titles were created at the time by participants in the movements themselves, yet this did not prevent them becoming potent. The advocates of change outlined their aims as bringing ‘science’ and ‘democracy’ to China. Perhaps the single most important organization that emerged from the movement was the Chinese Communist Party, founded in 1921. In retrospect, the Party itself would stress over and over again that the May Fourth Movement, with its questioning of how China could be made modern, had found the answer to its own question located in the victory of Mao in 1949.
There is no absolute agreement on how long the May Fourth era lasted, and many books offer confident but differing verdicts on this: 1917–23, 1915–25, and other variations. What seems fair to say is that the movement was not active before the 1911 Revolution, and had faded by the time war with Japan broke out in 1937. It also seems reasonable to say that it started and ended a little after and before these dates, respectively. More precise dating is difficult, and also misses the point, because so much of what made the movement important was not specific events, but atmosphere and mood.

Every generation of scholars finds its own meaning in the May Fourth Movement. One of the earliest and still most important books in English on the topic was Chow Tse-tsung’s *The May Fourth Movement*. First published in 1960, Chow was himself a junior participant in the movement (Mao Zedong had attended Chow’s school, 15 years previously), and his book’s careful examination of the differing interpretations of the movement by such varied groups as the Communists, Nationalists, traditionalists, and westerners still repays reading. Chow’s own conclusions were that ‘The May Fourth Movement was actually a combined intellectual and socio-political movement to achieve national independence, the emancipation of the individual, and a just society by the modernization of China’. He argued that the movement sought to do this by ‘attacking tradition and by re-evaluating attitudes and practices in the light of modern western civilization, the essence of which they thought to be science and democracy. The basic spirit of the movement, therefore, was to jettison tradition and create a new, modern civilization to “save China”’. Later studies moved the focus away from the intellectual ferment in Beijing and looked to other cities, for instance Joseph Chen’s work on Shanghai, where popular protest and the labour movement had more effect than they had done in the capital. A significant reassessment of the movement was Lin Yu-sheng’s *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness* (1979). This argued that the single-minded iconoclasm of the most radical May Fourth opponents of Confucianism was, ironically, shaped by the uncompromising morality of Confucianism itself. More recently, the effect of the movement in cities outside Beijing and Shanghai has been examined in...
much more detail, in works such as Wen-hsin Yeh’s study of the rise of communism in Hangzhou, and James Carter’s consideration of its effects in the far northeastern city of Harbin.19

In addition to a geographical spread in examinations of the movement, terms such as ‘modernization’, ‘tradition’, ‘science’, and ‘democracy’ also came under the spotlight in the following decades. A powerful re-examination of the May Fourth Movement’s legacy was Vera Schwarcz’s The Chinese Enlightenment in 1986. This made a crucial distinction between the older May Fourth generation, including figures such as the author Lu Xun and the founder of the CCP, Chen Duxiu, who had an unremitting hostility towards China’s Confucian tradition, and a younger generation who were willing to adapt, rather than reject, aspects of China’s past in their quest to ‘save’ it in the present.20 Even now, academic interest in the topic shows no signs of waning; a group of scholars produced a major reassessment of the movement in 2002.21 Although not so much work on the movement has been aimed at the non-specialist reader, Jonathan Spence’s The Gate of Heavenly Peace: The Chinese and their Revolution, 1895–1980 (1981) provides an incisive account on the grand scale of the lives of a generation of May Fourth writers and thinkers as their lives were changed by war and revolution.22

There has also been new thinking in China itself on the movement. Although most recent Chinese writing on May Fourth and the New Culture Movement is not accessible in English, it is important to know that there has been a lively interest in contemporary China in the history of the early twentieth century. Academic work, which for many decades was dominated by the need to follow the political orthodoxy of the Communist Party, has now been given more freedom to explore other aspects of the era. Books both popular and academic pour out on everyday life, thought, politics, and society in the Republican era. The era of May Fourth has come into popular consciousness as China tries to define its contemporary identity.23

What, then, is important to understand in trying to assess the May Fourth Movement and the New Culture at the turn of a new century? Why is this set of events from the early part of the previous century still so potent that the Chinese government would install
new memorials to it in the centre of their capital city in 2002? And why does it matter to our understanding of what ‘modern’ China means?

Going back to the May Fourth Movement is important in an era in which China has seen the abandonment of Maoism at home and the collapse of the Cold War order abroad. Under these circumstances, the idea that Communist China was the logical endpoint of the country’s early twentieth-century quest for modernity is less convincing than it might have been in the 1950s or 1960s. Looking again at the May Fourth period, the time when Chinese Communism emerged, and seeing what alternative paths China might have taken, has a great deal of significance for understanding the variety of political possibilities in China today.

But it is important to understand that the May Fourth experience is a very elusive one. For instance, there is a lively debate about whether the ‘May Fourth Movement’ was quite as spontaneous as many observers later declared. One historian has examined the question of when the term itself emerged, and declared: ‘The May Fourth movement did not end up with this name. It had it before it started.’24 This ‘canonization’ of the idea led to it being taken up by various groups, including the CCP and the Nationalists, either as an object of veneration or of vilification. But the ‘May Fourth’ that they talked about had little to do with any events on the ground in the early years of the Chinese Republic.

Some are happy to suggest that the May Fourth Movement existed, but want to question its ‘uniqueness’ as a crucible of iconoclastic, modern thought in China. Recent work has reassessed the last years of the Manchu Qing dynasty which ruled China, arguing that the last decade of the nineteenth and first decade of the twentieth century were not the last throes of a decadent, dying imperial regime doomed to fail. The ‘Hundred Days of Reform’ in 1898, which we will encounter shortly, saw a short-lived flowering of highly progressive reformist thought that made use of Chinese indigenous belief systems such as Confucianism rather than rejecting them. Although a countercoup by the Dowager Empress Cixi put an end to the reforms, their legacy lived on into the next century. Yet reformers
did not have to wait two decades after 1898 for the May Fourth Movement to turn up to justify their demands for change. After the disaster of the 1900 Boxer War against the imperialist powers, which saw the Qing government defeated and humiliated by having to pay crippling reparations, the dynasty itself realized that it would have to change. The first decade of the twentieth century saw significant reform in Chinese public life, including the establishment of local assemblies, chambers of commerce, and academies, all with government encouragement. Students also studied in Japan in ever-greater numbers, bringing their new-found knowledge back with them. By this stage, the sudden reverse in policy was too late for many of the students, merchants, and secret societies who were now dedicated to revolutionary overthrow of the Qing dynasty rather than constitutional reform alongside it. But the change in China’s public culture during the era of the ‘New Governance’ (Xinzheng) reforms was remarkable, and it can be argued that a real ‘enlightenment’ in Chinese thought took place. The most symbolic action was the abolition in 1905 of the traditional examination system, the point of entry for the civil service for a millennium, replaced by tests in ‘western learning’. We have to venture into the realms of counterfactual history to work out whether the Qing could have survived if it had reformed more quickly or carried out its policies slightly differently. But the idea that the late Qing was essentially a time of inevitable decline and moribund thought on governance and society is misleading. People started thinking in innovative ways before the Republic had been established in 1912, let alone before the student demonstrations of 1919.

So the May Fourth period did not spring up from nowhere. But it was significant, and significantly different from what came before and after. Despite its efforts at reform, the Qing dynasty did fall, and the Republican society that followed it was new in important ways, from the type of clothes people wore to the way in which they related to symbols of the nation such as memorials and flags. The ‘May Fourth’ era has become legendary in Chinese memory to the extent that in later years it has indeed become endangered by becoming a sort of brand name within which different political groups can
include any events or strands of thought that are useful to them. When we go back to the reality of that period in the early Republic, between World War I and the crisis over the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in the early 1930s, we can identify changes and ideas that were real at the time to many of the participants, people who did not think of themselves simply as pawns in a wider game of political manoeuvring, but people whose everyday existence – where they worked, ate, studied – was a bewildering mixture of old and new. Many people living in that period did see the era at the time as something new and different. The May Fourth era reflected much that was innovative, often brought in from the west, though, as we will see, showing an interest in sources as varied as Japan, Turkey, India, and Eastern Europe as well. It also reflected continuity with the past: Confucius was forgotten or condemned only by the most radical of that era, while others put the spin of modernity on the venerable sage to help them make sense of the new world.

The May Fourth era represented, then, a distinct break from the late Qing empire and the era of the Nationalist government in the 1930s, which was cut short by war. It took place during a period when the world, weary after the Great War, turned its face outward and celebrated internationalism. This was an era when, however slowly, the global tide started to turn against imperialism. It did not seem to do so to the Chinese at the time, for the western powers appeared hypocritical in their advocacy of self-determination for nations while they steadfastly held on to their large territorial possessions. Yet the age of empire was drawing to a close. It was also a time when the cosmopolitan city came of age in an era of globalized culture, in Shanghai in particular. All these elements came together for one short period, and while aspects of everything I have listed appeared both before and after that time, the May Fourth period marked a unique combination of all of them: a sense of real and impending crisis; a combination of a plurality of competing ideas aimed at ‘saving the nation’, and an audience ready to receive, welcome, contest, and adapt these ideas. In that way, the era remains unique to date in the history of mainland China, although liberalization in Taiwan at the end of the twentieth century has given rise to a situation in some
ways quite similar, but, as I will suggest in the final chapter, for rather different reasons.

The fact that ‘May Fourth’ did become a phrase or set of images that meant different things to different people suggests that something about it continued to resonate in Chinese intellectual and political life long after the events themselves, in the way that ‘the Sixties’, that vaguely defined term, still captures a wealth of images, often contradictory, for many in the west. Clearly the meaning of ‘May Fourth’ changed according to who used it. It had a very different significance for the CCP leadership and for the students in Tian’anmen Square in 1989, both of whom claimed ownership of the legacy of the ‘real’ May Fourth and of terms such as ‘democracy’ which were associated with it. But the fact that it was ‘May Fourth’ that they both chose to fight over in 1989, icons of ‘May Fourth’ such as the writer Lu Xun that the Cultural Revolution had tried to claim for a very different sort of China a quarter of a century before, and ‘May Fourth’ that the Nationalist leader Chiang Kaishek had attacked a quarter of a century before that suggests that for all these very different people and movements, the idea of May Fourth had, and continues to have, a symbolic significance over a century not shared, for instance, by the May Thirtieth Incident of 1925 or the National Salvation Movement in 1936, both of which were also important demonstrations against imperialism.

This book follows one set of people and their ideas, the ‘May Fourth’ generation and their ‘New Culture’ in the early twentieth century, over the course of some 80 years. But these people are a very particular section of Chinese society. In all the periods, they have tended to be the best-educated, most cosmopolitan urban-dwellers. What makes them interesting is their fascination with the foreign, the unfamiliar, the bizarre, but by definition this makes them less than typical. The cities on which I concentrate, Beijing and Shanghai, were often different from many of the smaller and more inward-looking cities of the interior. The largest area that remains in the shadows in the story told here is what the pre-eminent sociologist of Republican China, Fei Xiaotong, called ‘China of the native soil’ (Xiangtu Zhongguo), the vast rural hinterland which contained the
overwhelming majority of China’s population in the early twentieth century, as it does today.\(^{28}\) This is a book about urban ideas. However, for much of the twentieth century, the growing dominance of the countryside in Chinese politics, culminating in the rural revolution of the CCP, meant that the cities, at least for a while, became subject to policies that tried to downgrade their importance in comparison to the prominence they had had in the earlier part of the century. Yet in a real sense, Mao’s turn towards rural politics was shaped by the May Fourth Movement as well. His increasing hostility towards the cities and the educated classes, expressed most violently in the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, was fuelled by his conviction that many of the systems of thought that appeared in early twentieth-century China did not get to grips with the reality of rural poverty. In addition, he was angered by the often high-handed tendency of Chinese urban intellectuals to extrapolate from their own experience to assume that they knew what was best for the population at large.

Yet the cities remained a source of fascination even under Mao, and were always an essential part of defining what it was that made China modern. Ideas of the city were important even for the rural-dwellers who knew it only in their imaginations. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, when millions of rural migrants flood illegally to the cities, and large parts of China’s international self-image are tied up with the Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008 and the World Expo in Shanghai in 2010, it is hard to argue that the cities do not have a vital role to play in the mind of China, even for those who do not live in them.

The rest of the book will map the larger contours of change and continuity in the way that May Fourth thinking changed China over the decades. Where people lived, ate, drank, and went on dates will be of as much concern to understanding the context of particular strains of thought as a detailed analysis of how various political, philosophical, or literary factions disputed with each other. Yet to understand the period, it is important first to ask what it was that drove China to the point where the demonstrators came together in the movement of 1919. The answers lie in the decades that preceded that explosive event.
The Fall of the Chinese Empire

A novel published in 1830, Li Ruzhen’s *Flowers in the Mirror*, deals with the lives of upper-class Chinese, one of whom, Duo the Helmsman, firmly states ‘The fact of the matter is that our China must be regarded as the root of all other countries.’ Although the author could not know it, *Flowers in the Mirror* was written in the very last days of the period when China could be utterly self-confident about its own culture. When the novel was written, China did not just believe that her own civilization was superior to that of any other country; she knew it for an indisputable fact. Chinese technology, after all, had invented printing, gunpowder, and ceramics centuries before they had appeared in the west; the government was organized by a bureaucracy chosen, to a certain extent, on merit through written examinations; and its ethical system, based on the teachings of Confucius, told its people that their way of life and thought was the best that there could be.

China can trace its culture in an unbroken line to societies that emerged some 4,000 years ago. Written Chinese characters used today look very similar to those that emerged in the third century BCE. The same century saw the first unification of the warring kingdoms scattered around the North China plain. The first Emperor of China who ruled over those unified states called his dynasty ‘Qin’ (pronounced chin), from which the word ‘China’ originates. And although the Qin Emperor spent just a few decades on the imperial throne, the unified empire he had established lasted, albeit in slightly different forms, for the next 2,000 years. Dynasties rose and fell: the early Han, when China’s first historical classics were composed; the medieval Tang, which saw the flowering of perhaps China’s finest poetry; and the Song, marked by a new commercial culture that saw roads and canals expand all across China. Science and the arts flourished, and government developed into a sophisticated system of control run by bureaucrats who were chosen by competitive examination. China was self-confident but not self-contained: culture from central Asian and northern Tungusic civilizations was absorbed willingly on occasion, by force on others. The wonders of the Chinese
civilization were reported back to the west by travellers: Marco Polo’s famous (though possibly fraudulent) account calls the southern city of Hangzhou ‘Without doubt the finest and most splendid city in the world’. Although China, like all societies, went through periods of war and decline, a new dynasty always emerged to bring the society back to a new peak of splendour.\[^{30}\]

But in the mid-nineteenth century, this changed. China began to fall apart for a variety of reasons: revolutions from within; a growing dissatisfied underclass who resented the wealth of the ruling classes; and, in addition, a violent catalyst, the attacks by the western imperial powers, determined to open China up to trade.

Since 1644, the Chinese empire had been under the control of the Qing dynasty, whose leaders were not ethnically Chinese but Manchus, a nomadic warrior people from a region to the northeast of the main Chinese landmass. This region became known in the west as Manchuria. In the seventeenth century, the native Chinese dynasty, the Ming, had lost its grip on rule, and proved no match for the agile Manchu invaders. Having taken over China, for much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Manchu rulers undertook military campaigns which expanded their territories into one of the world’s great land empires. Over the years, they brought under their control areas as far away as Central Asia and Tibet. Yet the Manchu emperors were sensitive to the charge that although they had conquered China’s territory, their subjects considered them to be uncouth barbarians unfitted to rule over the oldest civilization in the world. So the Manchu emperors followed two policies at once. On the one hand, they showed that they were in tune with traditional Chinese culture. They wrote their imperial orders in elegant classical Chinese script, and painted and wrote poetry in the long-honoured style of the Chinese literary scholars. Kangxi, one of the greatest of the Qing rulers, sponsored the publication of a massive new encyclopedia, intended to define knowledge on all aspects of Chinese tradition and society. However, the Manchus also kept themselves carefully separated as an ethnic group, with clearly different customs from the majority ethnic Chinese population (known as the ‘Han’), and with the privileges that an occupying power expected to enjoy.\[^{31}\]
The balance between the rulers and ruled lasted throughout the eighteenth century, a time when China thrived under its alien but naturalized ruling dynasty. Although there were pockets of resistance by some who regarded the Manchus as invaders, the majority of China’s elites and masses seemed to have little resentment at Qing rule. Meanwhile, China’s population doubled from 150 million to 300 million. The population grew stronger as it ate crops such as maize and potatoes newly imported from the New World; better still, these crops grew in barren soil where rice and wheat did not, enabling settlers to move for the first time to remote regions in the west and the north, and claim them for China. Health and welfare improved under the Qing, with a complex system of disaster relief and surveys of public health undertaken by the government at central and local level. Perhaps the most striking aspect of the development of preventative medicine was the widespread use of inoculation against smallpox, a century before it became widespread in the west, although unlike in Europe, the serum developed by the Chinese doctors was not injected but blown up the patient’s nose.

But beneath the prosperity were darker signs. Young, poor men found it harder and harder to find wives, partly because of female infanticide, and also because richer men took several wives at once to show off their prosperity; this created a discontented, unstable underclass. While crops grew well in many areas, in others they failed, causing famine, or else were washed away by disastrous floods. Social unrest could be seen in the wave of uprisings that swept across China from the mid-eighteenth century onwards. Some were small-scale, like the ‘sorcery scare’ of 1768 which saw hundreds of people in the coastal province of Anhui convinced that sorcerers were stalking the land, turning victims into zombies who would do their bidding. Others were much harder to suppress, such as the Wang Lun rebellion of 1774, in which a mendicant martial-arts expert led thousands of followers who were convinced that his special Buddhist powers made them invulnerable to weapons; the rebellion was put down only with massive bloodshed. In addition, China’s sheer size became a problem. The Qing dynasty’s massively successful territorial expansion had brought it military glory, but it also made it easier...
for people to disappear to a new life, avoiding obligations such as paying taxes. Slowly the Qing dynasty’s finances began to weaken as their revenues became too small to maintain their overstretched empire.\textsuperscript{33}

So China was showing signs of breakdown even when the first foreigners arrived from the west demanding trade. But at first, the Son of Heaven, as the Chinese Emperor was always known, could afford to send the foreigners away empty-handed. In 1793, the British sent an ambassador, Lord Macartney, at the head of a large delegation which was to negotiate with the emperor to allow trade to open up with Britain. The Emperor sent him off almost immediately with a polite but firm dismissal. Looking at the machines and tools which Macartney had brought from the west, the Emperor told him: ‘We have never valued ingenious articles, nor do we have the slightest need of your country’s manufactures.’ The British, however, were not to be put off that easily, and they had a tool to force their way into the China market, a new, and astoundingly popular product: opium.

Opium had been known but relatively little used in China before the early nineteenth century, as it tended to be an exclusive, luxury product. However, its popularity suddenly grew after 1800. As the British East India Company grew more and more opium poppies in India, they looked to expand the market for their product. They soon found that there were eager customers in China. At all levels of society, people smoked opium; rich court officials bored by their sedentary lives, or urban workers whose daily drudgery of hauling large loads from place to place, could be eased by opium’s pain-killing effects.\textsuperscript{34} By the 1820s, there were around a million regular users of the drug in China. The sale was highly profitable for the British, but it provoked the anger of the Chinese imperial court. The Emperor made it clear that this pernicious substance, nick-named ‘the foreign mud’ or ‘the black smoke’ by the Chinese, had to be dealt with. In 1836, the Emperor declared that it had ‘pervaded the country with its baneful influence’.\textsuperscript{35}

After toying with the idea of legalizing opium, in 1839 the court demanded that the British cease all trade in the drug. They sent a special ‘Opium Commissioner’ named Lin Zexu, who besieged the
British opium factories in the southern city of Canton until they agreed to hand over the drugs. Lin then arranged for the raw opium to be flushed out to sea, and sent a stern letter to Queen Victoria, in which he advised her to tell her countrymen not to deal in opium, but to stick to trading in goods such as ‘tea and rhubarb’ (Lin was convinced that the latter was essential to the health of Europeans). As far as Lin was concerned, the dispute was over. But this was not the end of the matter. The British Foreign Secretary, Lord Palmerston, regarded the seizure of the opium by the Chinese as an act of war against the British Crown, and authorized warships to go to China and force the Chinese to retract the ‘injuries inflicted by Chinese authorities upon British subjects resident in China’. The ‘Opium War’ of 1839–42 followed, with superior British technology literally outgunning anything the Chinese defenders could offer. In 1842, the Chinese had to sign the humiliating Treaty of Nanjing, whereby they agreed to open ports to British trade, pay compensation for the destroyed opium, and hand over the island of Hong Kong to Britain ‘in perpetuity’. Among the ‘treaty ports’ set up in this way was the small port town of Shanghai. This was the beginning of what the Chinese even now refer to as the ‘century of humiliation’, the period when China’s foreign and domestic policy was largely decided not by the Chinese government or people, but by foreign occupiers.

For the British had breached the Chinese wall, but there were plenty of other powers waiting to rush in. The Chinese had chosen the worst moment to fall behind in military technology; the late nineteenth century saw a huge scramble for empire in Asia and Africa, with European powers ranging from Britain, France, and Russia to smaller players such as Belgium and Sweden all looking for their share of the spoils. This was a time of scientific and pseudoscientific triumphalism in the west, and perhaps the most powerful of all ideas was Social Darwinism, the perversion of Darwin’s idea of natural selection by sociologists such as the Briton Herbert Spencer. Spencer had argued that races and nations were in competition, just as species were, and those races that did not come out on top of the evolutionary battle were doomed to become slave races, or worse still, disappear completely.
Although Social Darwinism is now recognized as racist pseudo-science, in the late nineteenth century it was a powerful idea in Europe, and it caught on rapidly in one of China’s neighbouring states – Japan. Before the mid-nineteenth century, Japan had had a very different history from China. Christian missionaries from Europe had arrived in Japan in the sixteenth century, and the Japanese regents, or shogun, became worried that the new faith might catch on in Japan and destroy the traditional religions of Buddhism and Shinto, undermining social stability. So around 1600, the shogun took the radical step of closing off Japan to the outside world almost entirely. Japanese citizens might not leave the country on pain of death, and only a few foreigners, mostly Dutch and Chinese, were allowed to trade with Japan via a small trading post in the harbour of the city of Nagasaki. Japan turned inwards, and for 250 years its rulers had no intention of allowing any foreign contacts to develop. But as in China, the mid-nineteenth century saw western powers refusing to accept ‘No’ for an answer to their requests for trade and diplomatic relations. In the case of Japan, it was not Britain but the United States that forced the issue. In 1853, US Commodore Matthew Perry sailed a fleet of gunships into Tokyo Bay, and gave the shogun an ultimatum to accept his demand that Japan should open its ports to US ships, or else be prepared for war. The shogun had to accept, but his capitulation in the face of the foreigners destroyed his prestige utterly. Two feudal clans hatched a conspiracy, and began to undermine the shogun; in 1868, he was overthrown to make way for a new regime.

This coup, known as the Meiji Restoration, ushered in a complete change of policy in Japan. The new leaders, including men such as Yamagata Aritomo and Ito Hirobumi, saw the dreadful fate that had overtaken China during the Opium Wars, and resolved that Japan must resist the west at all costs. The way they did this was a crash programme of modernization, introducing into Japan a whole range of reforms at breakneck speed: a new western-style constitution, a massive conscripted army, universal compulsory schooling, and, above all, modern technology and weapons. At the same time, western political ideas, including nationalism, Social Darwinism,
Christianity, and democracy, flooded in, as books on these topics were eagerly translated into Japanese from the original English, French, or German. There were native bestsellers too, such as the writer Fukuzawa Yukichi’s book *Conditions in the West*, which quickly became a million-copy seller, no mean feat in nineteenth-century Japan. The result of all the reforms was perhaps the quickest and most total transformation of any society in history. In 1853, Japan had been a feudal, agricultural country in danger of being taken over by western powers. By 1895, it was a rapidly growing industrial power, with a modern political system and the highest literacy rate in Asia. Significantly, it also had colonies of its own. From being a country in danger of being colonized itself, Japan had managed to become the latest great imperial power on earth.*36*

This never happened in China. There are several reasons why not, including a much greater level of social unrest and the sheer size of the country. However, an important reason was the lack of direction from the top. The continued, if precarious, survival of the Qing may have hurt China’s chances of rapid reform, as the 70 years after the Opium War saw a constant battle between the conservative and reformist factions at court, with the former generally on top until late in the dynasty’s history. While the conservatives were willing to allow a certain level of reform in the area of technology or industry, their efforts were ambivalent. However, the imperialist powers met less opposition to their plans to expand than they might have expected. Efforts such as the ‘self-strengthening’ movement of the 1860s saw attempts to develop western technology in China in the context of Confucian reforms. Yet the revolutionary nationalist Sun Yatsen wrote to the prominent official Li Hongzhang in 1893, pointing out that Japan ‘opened her country for western trade later than we did . . . yet in only a short period her success in strengthening herself has been enormously impressive . . . Here lies the reason why we in China have not achieved much; public opinion and entrenched ideas simply will not allow it’.*37*

By 1900, the foreign presence in China was inescapable; whole areas such as Hong Kong and the centre of Shanghai were ruled by the British, the French controlled areas of Yunnan, in the southwest, and
even where they did not have formal control, foreigners were granted special legal and trade rights anywhere on Chinese soil. Shanghai, in particular, was now well on its rise to become a world trading entrepôt and was without doubt the major city of East Asia. Yet this was in large part because of the special rights granted to foreigners, which were as great, if not a greater, source of anger among the Chinese than the outright colonization of places such as Hong Kong. Under these ‘extraterritoriality’ rules, foreigners from countries such as Britain and the US could not be prosecuted under Chinese law for most offences committed in China. They had instead to be tried in a special expatriate western court, whose western judges were suspected (understandably if not always justly) of being biased against the Chinese. (No wonder that among many Chinese, feelings toward Germans warmed considerably when they later lost their extraterritorial rights in China after their defeat in World War I.) The injustice of extraterritoriality was most strongly symbolized in a notorious sign reading ‘NO DOGS OR CHINESE’ which was said to have been placed outside a British-run public park in Shanghai. The sign itself was an urban legend, and never actually existed, but the attitudes it reflected were real and everyday experiences for many Chinese people. As well as having its authority eaten away by the foreigners, the Qing also suffered from internal rebellions. The Taiping Uprising of 1856–64 was one of the bloodiest civil wars in history, with hundreds of thousands of Chinese following Hong Xiuquan, a half-mad visionary who claimed to be the younger brother of Jesus sent to save China from the Manchu ‘devils’ who ruled it. The Qing rulers put the Taiping down, but at tremendous cost to their own power. Then there was the Boxer Uprising of 1900. This was a peasant rebellion, dedicated to supporting the Manchus and expelling the foreigners, and the Qing gambled for high stakes by backing the rebellion and declaring war against the foreign powers. The strategy backfired as the imperialists joined forces (the first ever multinational armed intervention), put down the rebellion, and forced the Qing to pay massive indemnities in retribution. All these factors gave added force among the elite to a newly introduced ideology from Europe: nationalism. Thinkers such as Yan Fu argued that it was the constitution
of Britain and France as modern nation-states, with their people educated to think of themselves as citizens not subjects, rather than an empire built on Confucian ritual, that had enabled them to prosper and conquer in the new world order.39

The relationship between China and Japan during the late nineteenth century gave many people in both countries pause for thought. For China’s weakness and Japan’s rise to strength were utter reversals of the traditional order in East Asia. Over the centuries, Japan, like Korea and much of Southeast Asia, had drawn heavily on Chinese culture in religion, architecture, literature; even the Japanese writing system was borrowed from China’s. Now, suddenly and bizarrely for both sides, it was Japan that had won out and China that was being defeated in the region. This led to a curious mix of cultural deference towards China’s past and racism towards its present. Fukuzawa Yukichi, who had praised westernization so lavishly in the nineteenth century, justified Japan’s drive to conquer colonies and leave China behind: ‘Intimacy with bad friends will necessarily give us a bad reputation. From the bottom of my heart I reject such friendship in East Asia.’40

Whatever the Japanese claims for altruism, however, Japanese politicians were as caught up in the same Social Darwinist rush to ‘conquer or be conquered’ as the western powers, and they had set their eyes early on two neighbouring territories that they feared would be taken over by western powers that wished to cut Japan down to size. One of those territories was Korea, which Japan had begun to annex in the 1880s. It won even more secure control after defeating the Chinese for possession of the Korean peninsula in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–5. The other was Manchuria. If Russia had control over the Sea of Japan, politicians in Tokyo thought, might it not soon decide to invade Japan? Negotiations between the two sides broke down, and in 1904 war broke out. The western world was stunned as Japan, the upstart Asian power, battered the Russian fleet, launched a massive campaign on the territory of Manchuria, and won a surprise victory. Russia was forced to concede its gains in the southern part of Manchuria, although it retained railway rights in the northern half. It was notable that neither side, throughout the war, had asked the
Chinese government, on whose soil the war was taking place, what they thought. It was proof that China’s destiny now lay in the hands of foreigners who bore her little goodwill.

The late Qing did see attempts at reform. In 1898, the Guangxu Emperor proved willing to consider wide-ranging technological, constitutional, and social changes, although the reforms were cut off after a mere three months when the conservative faction at court launched a counter-coup against him. Ironically, the failure of the Boxer Uprising against the foreign presence just two years later forced many of the same conservatives into changing their minds from 1902 onwards, with ‘New Government’ (Xinzheng) reforms leading to changes such as the institution of more representative local government and the abolition of the centuries-old examinations in classical literature for entry to the bureaucracy.41

Uneasy Birth: The Chinese Republic

Despite its reforms, the first decade of the twentieth century was marked by yet more crises for the Qing, including attempts at revolution, some led by the Cantonese political activist Sun Yatsen, and ever-increasing demands from the foreign powers for concessions and territory. The end came unexpectedly, though. An uprising in Wuchang, in the southwest of China, started a local rebellion in late 1911 which sparked off uprisings against the dynasty by army commanders and the newly empowered middle classes. The Qing lost its grip on power, and the last emperor, the five-year-old Puyi, abdicated to make way for a republic. The first president, the revolutionary leader Sun Yatsen, was forced to resign after just six weeks to make way for Yuan Shikai, a conservative leader with strong armed forces behind him. Yuan nipped China’s fledgling democracy in the bud. China had developed its first political party, the Nationalists (or Kuomintang), led by Sun Yatsen, which had won a large number of parliamentary seats in China’s first (and last) free and open general election in 1912. But Song Jiaoren, the brilliant young politician tipped as the Nationalist prime minister, was gunned down at Shanghai railway station as he was about to board the train to Beijing to start...
negotiations with President Yuan Shikai. Agents of Yuan were strongly suspected of having arranged the killing. In the chaos that followed, Yuan outlawed the Nationalist Party and forced Sun Yatsen and his followers into exile, while taking more and more power for himself. He eventually tried to restore Confucianism to its former position of authority in public discourse, and even attempted to have himself crowned emperor, though he was forced to step back from this decision after local militarist rulers around China made it clear they would not permit it. It was his attempt at a Confucian coup that provoked radical thinkers to promote the idea that what China needed was a ‘new culture’. 

Yuan died of uraemia in 1916, and China then split into several regions, all under the control of military leaders (‘warlords’) who engaged in endless battles trying to take over the whole of China, without lasting success. For the next decade, China had no strong central ruler at all. China’s lack of unity during this period had serious consequences for the country’s future. The foreign powers, seeing that they could play China’s rivals for power off against one another, took to stirring the China pot with gusto. The British, French, Americans, and, above all, the Japanese began to make rival claims and demands on China. World War I provided a temporary distraction for the western powers, but this gave the Japanese an advantage in pushing for concessions. In 1915, the Japanese government put forward ‘Twenty-One Demands’ to Yuan Shikai’s government, demanding huge economic and commercial rights throughout Chinese territory, as well as the right to station Japanese police in north China. In 1917, the Japanese made a secret deal with Britain and France to transfer German colonies in China to Japanese control if the Allies won. This led to the confrontation of 4 May 1919.

The ideas of nationalism which had developed among a small elite exposed to European thought in the late nineteenth century had by now spread to many of the urban youth, who for the first time realized that their future lay in the modern, globalized world, utterly different from the old Confucian one that lay in ruins. As part of China’s effort to understand the west, students were sent to Europe and America to study; their exposure to foreign countries only served
to strengthen their nationalist consciousness. So in 1919, hundreds of Chinese students in Paris surrounded the hotel where the Chinese delegates to the Versailles Conference were staying, making sure that they were physically unable to step out and sign the treaty. And in Beijing, 3,000 young students gathered in Tian’anmen Square on 4 May 1919, and marched through the city, demonstrating to show their disgust with the Chinese government’s capitulation to imperialism.

For the Versailles humiliation was just the latest in a string of defeats for China. First the Opium Wars had forced China to open up its doors to invading traders in narcotics who had the temerity to bring their religion of salvation along with the opium. Then the war against Japan, for so long China’s cultural inferior, had ended with defeat at sea in 1895, and the cession of the island of Taiwan to the Japanese. Just a decade later, in 1904–5, the Chinese could not stop the Russians and the Japanese fighting over Manchuria, a piece of Chinese territory. And now Versailles showed that the west’s supposed desire for international justice and order was yet another sham, with the Japanese acting like old-style imperialists. Many of China’s youth turned to nationalism, or in some cases Marxism, for salvation. Li Dazhao, one of the founders of the Chinese Communist Party, declared in 1918: ‘The victory of Bolshevism is the victory of the new spirit of enlightenment that all mankind can share in the twentieth century.’

In China and Japan, the ideas of an Asian brotherhood united against the west gained serious weight among those who thought about the ways in which their countries should develop. Pan-Asianism is now a largely forgotten concept, but before World War II it took powerful hold among many people in Asia, particularly those living in countries colonized by the west. Pan-Asianism started as a philosophical movement that believed that the nations of Asia had a spiritual quality absent in the materialist west. Although western nations might have more powerful technology and financial might, the power of spirituality resided first and foremost in Asia. The movement united thinkers from all over Asia, although ironically it was inspired by an American, Ernest Fenollosa, who emigrated to teach at Tokyo
University in 1878 and made it his mission to alert the Japanese to their own cultural past, which he felt they were neglecting in the rush to westernization. His first disciple, Okakura Kakuzô, enthusiastically took up these ideas, declaring that ‘Asia is one’, and further noting that Asia was ‘the source of our inspiration’, but ‘the expenditure of thought involved in synthesizing the different elements of Asiatic culture has given to Japanese art and culture a freedom and virility unknown to India and China’. In other words, it was Japan’s task, or rather its sacred duty, to awaken the rest of Asia to its destiny.46

This was largely because Social Darwinism had become powerful at that time. In both China and Japan, with the increasing spread of the great western empires, it seemed that it was eat or be eaten in the battle of the nations. The real turning point was the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5. Once Japan had shown that it really could beat a European nation, it was clear to many Chinese that they had to pay attention to what Japan had done if they wanted to be in the same position. Important in developing this kind of cooperation was the Tôa Dôbunkai, the Society for East Asian Common Cultures, which was started by the prominent pan-Asian Japanese politician Konoye Atsumarô, and joined by young Chinese modernizers such as the pioneering journalist Liang Qichao and Kang Youwei, a prominent and progressive adviser to the Chinese emperor.

This Japanese influence was very relevant, even for staunch Chinese nationalists such as Sun Yatsen. When Yuan Shikai seized control of the new republic, Sun fled to Japan. In 1916 Sun returned to regather his shattered Nationalist Party in the southern city of Canton. During a speech given in Shanghai that year, Sun declared: ‘If we want the Republic to be solid, we must first build its foundation. We need not look abroad for this foundation; we should seek it in the hearts of all the people of the nation.’ Yet the future of Sun’s project looked bleak at that point.

However, two major developments then took place. First, Sun was now totally disillusioned with the western powers who talked about peace and justice but seemed intent on carving China up yet further. Then, he was unable to persuade the Japanese to back him, though he made several attempts to get them to do so. So he turned to the new
power on the world scene who seemed to promise a new and fairer world: Soviet Russia. Having instigated a revolution and won a bloody civil war, the Bolsheviks began to turn their attention to revolutions abroad. In 1923, with encouragement from the Soviet agent Borodin, Sun Yatsen’s Nationalists and the fledgling Chinese Communist Party united their forces and started to train the National Revolutionary Army, a force intended to seize all China from the hands of the militarists and unite the country under one leader. Two men stood out particularly at the Military Academy set up by the USSR in Canton. One was a young Communist in charge of propaganda named Zhou Enlai. The other was a young military tactician named Chiang Kaishek. Both would have a powerful part to play in the shaping of twentieth-century China. Many years later, Zhou Enlai would become Prime Minister of Communist China. But in 1925, after Sun Yatsen’s death from cancer, it was Chiang Kaishek who came to prominence first. He used his influence in the National Revolutionary Army to gain control of the Nationalist Party, and in 1926 he began to lead his forces, with the Nationalists and Communists working together, in a campaign to conquer China. In fact, the army only managed fully to conquer the populous provinces of the east coast, their campaign ending near the cities of Nanjing and Shanghai. One of the prime threats to Chiang’s advance was neutralized when he coordinated the massacre of his Communist allies in Shanghai in April 1927, followed by the purge of an attempted uprising in Canton in December of the same year. Chiang also persuaded, cajoled, and bribed various warlords elsewhere in China into accepting his authority, and in 1928 he proclaimed himself the head of a new National Government of China, with its capital based at Nanjing (known in the west at that time as Nanking). He would rule there for the next ten years, until war with the Japanese forced him to retreat in 1937. However, behind the façade of national unity, Chiang’s government was an uneasy affair, desperately balancing rivals for power against each other: provincial warlords, the Communists, and the Japanese.

There has been a tendency, in looking at the wider sweep of Chinese history before Mao’s victory in 1949, to regard the period
after the 1911 revolution as a desolate era of lost opportunities. In many ways, though, the period was intellectually and socially one of the most promising and exciting in Chinese history. The rest of the book examines in detail how the May Fourth era and the ‘New Culture’, lived both in the mind and on the streets by elite and ordinary Chinese alike, have reverberated through Chinese history ever since the heady days of 1919, when the student demonstrators and their generation turned their thoughts to ‘saving the nation’.

‘Revolution,’ the great Chinese writer Lu Xun once observed, ‘is a bitter thing’. China has experienced a great deal of pain in its search for a modern identity, and its revolutions over the twentieth century – 1911, 1927, 1949 – have brought great suffering in their wake. Yet the story of China in that century is also of ideas that, for a time, brought joyful, transformative change, and may yet do so again. The May Fourth era was the crucible of many of those changes. It is impossible to understand how thoroughly this society of over a billion people was changed in the course of a hundred short years without returning to examine the experience and possibilities of that short period of promise in the early twentieth century.
‘Youth,’ wrote the radical activist Chen Duxiu in 1915, ‘is like early spring, like the rising sun, like trees and grass in bud, like a newly sharpened blade. It is the most valuable period of life.’ To be young and living in the city in China during the early years of the Republic, the period when Chen was writing, was to grow up in a dangerous yet deeply exciting time. For this generation, space opened up. This could be as individual as the opportunity to walk around freely given to young women whose feet were no longer bound; as local as the new places such as public parks, schools, cinemas, department stores, and factories which had not existed a generation before; and as global as the modernizing, imperialist, capitalist world that had forced itself on China but was also open for exploration by the Chinese.

In short, this chapter is about the excitement, the arrogance, and the uncertainty of being young at the dawn of Chinese modernity. To understand the ideas that changed China during this period, it is essential to understand the places and the people associated with those ideas. This chapter examines the atmosphere in Beijing and Shanghai in the interwar period, and then takes a closer look at some of the individuals and groups who lived in those cities. For the cities were essential to China’s development of a modern identity.

It was a very particular type of modernity which the new Chinese Republic encountered. Within a few years of the Republic’s birth in 1912, China had to deal with global powers exhausted by the destruction of World War I. China itself had, of course, been a participant in the war, an event leading to the betrayal and disillusionment that
caused the 1919 May Fourth demonstrations in Beijing. In Europe, though, there was a strong sense that the promise of progress of the Victorian era had been destroyed in the killing fields of the World War. Ideas that undermined rationality and grand, romantic views of the future jostled with the now tarnished idea that scientific, clinical modernity was an unalloyed good that could show the way forward for the world. Science was mustard gas as well as Marconi radios or medicine. The great powers, regardless of which side they had fought on, struggled to recover a lost pre-war idyll.2

Europe’s wartime agony and the culture of often forced frivolity that supplanted it was visible every day in China through the continuing imperialist presence. British veterans such as Maurice Tinkler, unable to find work at home in Lancashire after coming home from the Western Front, shipped out to Shanghai in 1919 as new recruits of the Shanghai Municipal Police, which kept law and order in the International Settlement. ‘Shanghai is the best city I have seen and will leave any English town 100 years behind’, he marvelled on arrival. ‘It is the most cosmopolitan city of the world bar none and the finest city of the Far East.’3 In the French Concession, marks of the European war could be seen everywhere, with major boulevards renamed Avenues Joffre and Foch after the victorious generals. Throughout the city, the newest American and European-style culture could be seen: fast cars, jazz bars, and advertisements for exciting new consumer products such as RCA gramophones and Golden Dragon cigarettes (for opium was not the only addictive drug that was mass-marketed in China; so was nicotine). The treaty port cities, and in particular Shanghai, created a particular type of imperial modernity that sometimes seemed to suspend the reality that the cities were squarely in Chinese territory, inhabited mostly by Chinese. Yet outward-looking aspects of that modernity were explored by Chinese too, such as the writer Shi Zhecun, who wandered around the bookstores of the International Settlement and the coffee shops of the French Concession, living a Parisian Left Bank lifestyle at one remove.

The world the Great War had made was part of China’s Republican experience, for Chinese as well as foreigners. From the White
Russians in exile in Shanghai from the Soviet government brought to power by the collapse of the Czarist empire to the associations of Chinese labour veterans of the European front, the world of war came to China just as China had gone to the war. The May Fourth era itself was part of that changed world. It was in China’s cities where the new thinking developed, and in particular in Beijing and Shanghai.

**Beijing: Intellectual Centre of the Movement**

If a present-day visitor to Beijing wanted to retrace the path that Luo Jialun and his fellow-students took during the demonstration described at the start of this book, she or he would see little of the city as it was in 1919. But not everything has gone.

Starting in what is now Tian’anmen Square, you can walk through the Forbidden City in Beijing across a string of enclosures where emperors once held court. The yellow roof tiles and deep red buildings are still preserved as a monument to the grandeur of China’s imperial past. As you come out of the complex, you may see a Starbucks coffee stand, a symbol of how far global capitalism has reached. Walk across the moat at the back, cross the road, and walk right for about fifteen minutes. The avenue becomes less green and more cluttered with undistinguished buildings, mostly shops. The name of the street changes: it is now Wusi Dajie – ‘May Fourth Avenue’. Near a major crossroads, you can see a large gateway giving onto a large, redbrick building three storeys high, fronted by a courtyard. There is a stone canopy with four large pillars protecting the entrance from the elements. The notice at the front describes it as ‘The Museum of the New Culture Movement’. If you go in, you can see several large, whitewashed rooms with blackboards set at the front, and in the middle glass cases full of photographs of young, mostly smiling, men and women.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, this building was the main part of Peking University. Known as the ‘old red building’, this particular structure was left behind after the Communist victory in 1949, as the University moved in the 1950s to its current, much larger...
site, in the far northwest of Beijing. The building was then used as a set of offices, closed to the public, until the turn of the millennium, when it was refurbished, and opened in 2002 as a museum, with the teaching rooms repainted and preserved as they were in the 1910s and 1920s. For those who know modern Chinese history, the figures who spent time at the University are famous ghosts indeed. In particular, those who shaped the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), one of the most powerful political organizations in history, were here. Mao Zedong was an assistant in the library, under the head librarian Li Dazhao, one of the co-founders of the Party, along with Chen Duxiu, who became the dean of humanities. It was this university’s students who were also at the heart of the demonstrations on 4 May 1919.

Come out of the museum and keep walking along Wusi Dajie until you get to the top of Wangfujing Street. Turn right and walk south. Now Beijing’s most prestigious shopping street, lined with Japanese department stores and branches of McDonald’s, Wangfujing was known as Morrison Street in the early twentieth century, and was even then famous as a place for luxurious living. At the bottom, turn right, and walk for about fifteen minutes, and you will come right round again to the front of the Forbidden City, which looks onto Tian’anmen Square. The Square is a concrete giant, about a kilometre in each direction, built in the early 1950s. It can hold a million people, and has done so, at Mao Zedong’s orders in 1966 during the mass political rallies of the Cultural Revolution, and again in 1989, this time in defiance of the orders of the Communist Party. Like most of Beijing’s wide boulevards and grey, boxlike buildings, the square is an expression of architecture as faceless power: designed for mass rallies, not so friendly to individual human beings. Little of this was there in the early twentieth century, with the exception of the Tian’anmen itself, the Gate of Heavenly Peace which fronts the Forbidden City complex and is now located at the north end of the square, conveniently flanked by its new guardians, two metro stations, one to the west, one to the east. It was in front of the gate that the students gathered on 4 May 1919.

Beijing was the first centre of the May Fourth Movement. It had been made the capital during the Ming dynasty, some 500 years
before, and had the walls and towers of a typical Chinese city, although as in most cities, these fell victim to war or city planners in the course of the twentieth century. The government remained under the control of battling warlord factions through much of the period from 1911 to 1928. Liberalism and openness were therefore in short supply.

‘Few cities in China in the 1920s’, writes the historian David Strand, ‘looked so traditional and Chinese and at the same time harboured the essentials of modern and Western urban life’. Yet it was a city in crisis, lacking the self-confidence that would mark Shanghai during the same era. For most of the period after 1916, Beijing was a capital in name rather than reality, and after 1928 not even that. The death of President Yuan Shikai in 1916 led to over a decade of conflict between rival militarist rulers, and although the seizure of Beijing as a national capital was a goal for many of these rulers, few of them controlled more than a restricted area of China while claiming countrywide authority. Eventually, in 1928, the victory of the Nationalists’ Northern Expedition under Chiang Kaishek led to a new government being declared with its capital at Nanjing. Beijing, meaning literally ‘Northern Capital’, was renamed Beiping (transliterated at the time as Peiping), the name it retained for the period until 1949 when the victorious Communists renamed it Beijing and restored its status as the capital.

But even as it became shabbier and its infrastructure was neglected through the 1910s and 1920s, the city retained much of its imperial splendour. The city had been laid out with the magnificent, if brooding Forbidden City, the former imperial palace, at its centre, accessed through the Tian’anmen gate. The two main parts of the city, the Inner City to the north and the Outer City to the south, were surrounded by high grey walls of earth and brick, torn down in the early Maoist era. (Very few Chinese cities have large parts of their old walls left, Xi’an and Pingyao in Shanxi being among them.) Yet the modernization that arrived in so many Chinese cities – such as Shanghai, Tianjin, and Guangzhou – was to be seen in Beijing as well, in the form of sewage pipes, telephones, and eventually trams. The roads were asphalted, but only in part, because traditional
mule-drawn carts could not cope with hard roads. Unlike Shanghai, the city did not become industrialized in a major way during this period. Therefore, the industrial working class, who would become the basis of a powerful labour movement in Shanghai in the 1920s, particularly after the foundation of the Communist Party, were not so much of a factor in Beijing, although rickshaw pullers and craft guild members provided the basis for protest against militarist politics and exploitative conditions. Foreigners were not officially involved with Beijing’s city administration as they were in Shanghai, but the foreign presence was considerable nonetheless: diplomats were stationed in the capital, naturally, and they were joined by missionaries and traders. Exotic birds could be spotted, such as Bertrand Russell, who wrote his book *The Problem of China* (1922) as a result of a period as visiting professor of politics at Peking University.

The University was a reminder that, even at a time when much of the city appeared to be going to seed as the republican experience soured, there were oases of excellence. Peking University was the geographical and spiritual centre of the new thinking. This institution had been set up in 1898 as part of the reform movement of that year, when it was known as the Imperial University. It had had a very uncertain beginning, as many at the imperial court were unhappy about the institutionalization of western thought in the Chinese curriculum. After the revolution of 1911, the reformer Yan Fu, who had been the first translator of Mill and Spencer into Chinese, was made President of the University, and while he only lasted a few months, he insisted on standards of academic rigour which led to a series of significant faculty hireings. Among those who joined the teaching staff in the next couple of years were Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao, later to become the founders of the Chinese Communist Party, and Hu Shi, one of the most prominent literary reformers in modern China. Most notably, in 1916 a new University President, Cai Yuanpei, was appointed, whose period in control was to prove crucial not just for the University’s reputation, but for the whole May Fourth era. Cai was a brilliant scholar who had flourished in the late Qing dynasty, then gone to Germany for further study, and returned to China as an advocate of modernized education, or in his own phrase, ‘education
for a worldview’. Cai’s most notable policy was the encouragement of genuine academic freedom. This enabled younger scholars such as Li Dazhao, who personally disagreed with Cai Yuanpei’s Confucian morality, to publish and advocate alternative ideas.

The University’s most famous building was located very centrally, near the back wall of the Forbidden City and near Beihai Park. The ‘old red building’ was one of the landmarks that would always be recalled by former students of ‘Beida’ (as the university was known in abbreviated Chinese form), long after the campus had been moved, first during the war against Japan, then as a result of post-1949 expansion.

The somewhat Bohemian air that pervaded the university area was not lost on its students. The writer Zhu Haitao wrote that in ‘China’s Latin Quarter’, countless students lived packed into tiny apartment blocks, with the ground outside studded with tables, chairs, wash-stands, and so on. ‘Eating at Beida was casual [ziyou],’ Zhu noted. ‘It was convenient, cheap, and tasty, so everyone just got what he wanted.’

He explained:

You could eat in any way you wanted to. There were some people who were not used to this when they enjoyed it for the first time, especially people who were too used to a regulated, collective life, and they were a bit like people who lived underground and then came out . . . into the light of 500 electric lights, and were a bit startled . . . I myself had gone through ten years of strict missionary school life. Especially in the two years before [coming to] Beida, when we heard the gong, we ate . . . When we came here, there was none of that at all, no gongs, bells, calls . . . the call of your stomach was the only thing that called you to eat . . . In other schools, this was impossible.8

This ziyou (free, casual, almost licentious) attitude towards eating was unusual in a society in which regular meals were a cultural obsession in the face of the threat of drought, flood, and famine. But the term ziyou was also an indicator of the atmosphere that emerged more widely in the reconsideration of Confucian norms that the New Culture Movement unleashed. It was used not only for food, but also
for a new concept of ‘free love’ (ziyou ai). The element zi in ziyou also implied a new way for the Chinese to think about their conception of the self. Confucian thought had not been enthusiastic about pushing the individual self forward: to do so was to offend against dictates of proper modesty and the need to adhere to a more collective sense of good. Now, as part of the impact of western thought, which included ideas of the modern, autonomous self, the Chinese were encouraged to celebrate individual identity.

A general air of anarchic possibility perhaps flowed from the institution of the University itself:

The nicest thing [about being at Peking University] was searching out teachers. The doors of the university were open to anybody who wanted to come in . . . If you wanted to, you could go and hear any teacher’s class, and absolutely nobody would come in and ask you whether you were a Beida student or not, nobody would come . . . and want you to pay money as a listening-in fee for a class, and the most marvellous thing was that all Beida professors had this generous attitude . . . so not only could you listen in, but when you’d listened, you could go up to the professors and ask about difficult or doubtful parts . . . So I’ve described the most valuable atmosphere of the ‘Latin Quarter’ – a generous spirit of scholarship that did not calculate profit.9

The premodern Confucian tendency to value scholarship over monetary gain is evident in Zhu’s comments. But not everyone was quite as reverent towards Peking University, nor was formal enrolment quite as easy as slipping in and out of classes at the ‘old red building’. At that time, Zhu reminisced, only some 300 students applying to Beida and its prestigious rival, Qinghua, might get in from some 3,000 applicants. A popular saying had it that when one took entrance examinations, it was xiong (ferocious), but when one got in, one could song (slack off), and when one graduated, one’s belly would be kong (empty).10

Generational collaboration and conflict marked the short years of the May Fourth era, when intellectual debates were largely carried out through journals such as New Youth (the most radical in its hatred of Confucianism) and New Tide (more moderate, although its key contributors were generally younger than New Youth’s). Later, we will
examine in more detail some of the ideas about which they enthused. But when doing so, it is important to keep in mind the influence of the close-knit, challenging, hothouse atmosphere of the Peking University campus: students who lived together acted together as well. The same atmosphere at the same institution, although by then in a geographically different spot, would have a similar effect in the demonstrations of 1989 that would lead to the Tian’anmen tragedy.

**Shanghai: China’s Modern Challenge**

Beijing’s rival, Shanghai, was a very different sort of place. An outward-looking colonial city, it thinks now, as it did in the early twentieth century, not of the parochial task of upstaging its rival cities in China, but rather of ranking itself with New York, Paris, or Tokyo as one of the great cities of the world. Some of the most central parts of Shanghai’s architecture have survived much better than the monuments of the capital. The view that a visitor would see today on Shanghai’s famous waterfront, the Bund, is very similar to the vista in 1920, consisting of pompous buildings that housed landmarks such as the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank. The major shopping thoroughfare that leads off the Bund, Nanjing Road, has rather different businesses lining it today: Ajinomoto Noodles, the Sofitel Hotel, and McDonald’s again. But its mix of bright lights, advertising, and unashamed consumerism would not surprise anyone who knew the street in the 1920s. If you were to cross from the Bund to the other side of the creek, the Pudong area, which was mostly muddy flats covered in warehouses before 1990, you would find it now a science-fiction metropolis of skyscrapers, complete with a twenty-first-century magnetic levitation train to the new airport.

For practical reasons, Shanghai attained greater significance for many of the May Fourth generation from the early 1920s. The vicious competition between military ruling factions in Beijing led to ever greater political instability and the persecution of political radicals. In addition, the more outward-looking and relatively politically tolerant atmosphere of Shanghai appealed to many, along with the
commercial opportunities for publishing and distributing the new thought which poured from their pens.

Shanghai was a legendary city for all classes and nations; the Briton Maurice Tinkler was not alone in his awe. ‘Making whoopee’ was the crude but not inaccurate way in which a guidebook of the 1930s summed up the nightlife of Shanghai for rich foreign visitors.11 A character in a short story by the writer Ding Ling, a peasant seeking his fortune, says, ‘Shanghai’s a big place, not like where we come from. Lots of people with plenty of money. It’ll be easy making a living there.’12 For people around the globe, from world travellers to the poorest Chinese, Shanghai had a reputation for trashy verve befitting a polyglot bastard child of imperialism.

The city in its modern form was the product of the Opium Wars, a treaty port in which the western powers and, later, the Japanese provided a more obvious face for the imperialist presence in China than in a city such as Beijing. The city was physically divided into different sectors: most of the city was under Chinese rule, but along the waterfront of the Huangpu River sat the International Settlement, run by a Municipal Council dominated by the British, and to the west, the French Concession. The latter two areas were in effect colonies within Shanghai, with borders and guards to police travel between them, although, as in Cold War Berlin before the Wall went up, people did in fact go back and forth between the areas of the city for work and recreation. Even in the ‘foreign’ concessions, the Chinese made up more than 90 per cent of the population.

This forced encounter with imperialism was simultaneously gall- ing and seductive for the May Fourth generation. Chinese were frequently on the end of racist attitudes and abuse from the British, French, Americans, and Japanese who made up the bulk of the foreigners whom they encountered. Events such as the May Thirtieth Movement of 1925 showed how clashes could spiral. After the shooting of 11 Chinese workers during a demonstration against the owners of a Japanese mill by the Shanghai Municipal Police (many of whose squad were Chinese), there were widespread boycotts of foreign businesses and street demonstrations against imperialist aggression. Both the Nationalists and the CCP received valuable momentum.
from public anger at the May Thirtieth killings, which spread far beyond the city itself. Professors at Peking University declared on 9 June 1925 that:

The tragedy which has taken place in the International Settlement of Shanghai has filled the Chinese nation with horror and indignation... some Chinese students, who were merely young boys and girls, paraded as a manifestation of protest in the streets of Shanghai on May 30 last... Would any right-minded person regard these boys and girls as rioters and treat them with bullets and rounds of machine guns?13

Even when confrontation was not as violent as this, everyday reality made it clear that Shanghai was a society deeply divided by hardened European ideas of race, often expressed by the places where Chinese could not go and the roles they could not play. The public gardens on the Bund, the famous waterfront, were not open to the Chinese until 1928, with the exception of 'servants in attendance upon foreigners'.14 Interracial marriages or even relationships were heavily frowned upon. All this rankedle more in Shanghai than in Beijing precisely because of the seeming cosmopolitanism of the ‘world city’ which Shanghai had become. The British settler community invented the term ‘Shanghailand’ to express the idea that the tripartite city was somehow Other, not a part of China, not a colony, but a pseudo-country perhaps best described as a state of mind. And it is clear that this idea, if not the term, was also shared by many Chinese. For many Chinese in Shanghai, their primary identity continued to be derived from their places of native birth, rather than from their newly adopted city.15 Nonetheless, it is hardly surprising that Chinese nationalism developed so strongly in Shanghai, where the most confrontational aspects of imperialism were visible and rubbed in wherever either foreigners or Chinese walked, worked, or lived.

Yet the cosmopolitanism of the city, though tainted by the hierarchy of race, was not an illusion either. Architecture is one area in which this became apparent. True, the most visible architectural highlight, the Bund, was rooted in a parochial vision of Britishness, a mishmash bringing to mind the buildings of Manchester or other outposts of empire such as Calcutta, with few Chinese elements. Yet
other parts of the cityscape looked to the future and inspired foreigner and Chinese alike with their visions of a young city in a hurry. Skyscrapers appeared in Shanghai earlier than anywhere else in China, along with the neon lights which the novelist Mao Dun incorporated on the first page of his novel Midnight to give the flavour of Shanghai in what he called a ‘Romance of China in 1930’. Near the start of the novel, one character, an old man being driven through the centre of the city in a ‘1930-model Citroen’ is increasingly startled by what he sees:

A snake-like stream of black monsters, each with a pair of blinding lights for eyes, their horns blaring, bore down upon him, nearer and nearer! . . . He felt as if his head were spinning and his eyes swam before a kaleidoscope of red, yellow, green, black, shiny, square, cylindrical, leaping, dancing shapes, while his ears rang in a pandemonium of honking, hooting and jarring till his heart was in his mouth . . . [Looking out of the window, his eyes] fell straight away upon a half-naked young woman sitting up in a rickshaw, fashionably dressed in a transparent, sleeveless voile blouse, displaying her bare legs and thighs. The old man thought for one horrible moment that she had nothing else on.16

The impact of all these new sensations is too much for the old man, who has a stroke and dies at the climax of chapter 1. For some, however, the stimulation of the city was what made it unique. The writer Shi Zhecun, one of the most notable modernists of the 1930s, recalled how important the bookstores of Fuzhou Road, full of the latest European and American writing, had been to him as he developed his personal style. This was not just a world of bookstores, but also teahouses, stationery stores, and even brothels which made up a whole literary demi-monde. Literary figures might head to the bookstores of the big Chinese presses in Shanghai, the Commercial Press and the Zhonghua, and then to the import stores, Kelly and Walsh or the Sino-American Bookstore, a wealth that could stand comparison with bookshop paradises such as Charing Cross Road in London. For others, it was the smaller innovations, such as the café culture of (where else?) the French Concession which enabled them to inject an idea of European cosmopolitanism into their lives even
when they had never set foot outside China. The essayist Zhang Ruogu was caught up in the literary world’s ‘coffeehouse craze’ in the 1920s, spending time at favoured haunts such as Sullivan’s coffee shop, Constantine’s Russian café, and the Balkan Milk Store. He wrote, ‘... I spent practically all my leisure time in the cafés on Avenue Joffre ... Come late afternoon, all of us would gather ... and as we drank the strong and fragrant coffee to enhance our fun, we would gently talk our hearts out.’

Education was also part of the Shanghai experience. Although Peking University had the greatest prestige of any institution in China, Shanghai also had education at all levels and for all classes. St John’s University in Shanghai, founded in 1879, educated the children of the local elite, and became the most prominent Chinese Christian university in China in the 1920s. In contrast, Shanghai University, founded in 1922, had a more radical reputation, with Communist luminaries such as Qu Qiubai (a future Party leader) and Deng Zhongxia on the faculty. Learning English became an important skill in college, as textbooks for so many of the new western subjects were only available in that language. Yet as a total proportion of the population, university students were a very small minority. In 1934, there were fewer than 28,000 students registered at universities and colleges across all of China. Throughout this time, most of them attended institutions in three cities: Beijing, Shanghai, and Nanjing.

In general, the Chinese who lived the most ‘modern’ lives were an elite. The working classes did not spend their time drinking coffee or browsing through English-language books. The poorest might live in shanty-towns of dilapidated reed huts or even boats, or a straw shack. The better-off might aspire to the crowded backstreet alleyway houses known as shikumen. But even for those who did not share the life of the educated May Fourth generation, the modernity and internationalism of Shanghai was there every time they passed an advertisement for powdered Momilk or a Hollywood movie in the street, a Sikh policeman brought in by the British in the International Settlement, an elegant villa in the French Concession, or a marble British bank. Shanghai placed its contradictions squarely in the view of all its residents.
People: The May Fourth Generation

What sort of people lived in the cities and were makers of the New Culture experience? The answer is that the movement was the product of hundreds, if not thousands, of lives and voices. I have highlighted a few figures in particular because each of them expresses something central about the movement: its questioning of Chinese culture and its ability to deal with modernity, its ability to use commercialism and mass media to get its message across, and its struggle to reconcile nationalism with issues of gender and class. These are people with very different careers. Zou Taofen was a journalist and media entrepreneur; Du Zhongyuan a businessman and political activist; and Ding Ling and Lu Xun were among the most prominent literary figures of their day. They were not ‘typical’ May Fourth figures, because their commitment and their driven energy for their particular causes would have made them unusual in any society. But they give us a clear picture of the many facets of the era, and their writings and legacy will recur throughout the story told here of China’s twentieth century.

One factor that does unite these four figures is that they were, or ended up, broadly on the left wing of politics. Yet, with the implicit or explicit understanding of ‘progress’ that underpinned the New Culture, this is perhaps unsurprising. What is notable is how far that rather vague label of ‘left’ included such a wide variety of attitudes and ideas. These are lives of contradiction. Another thing that the May Fourth generation had in common was that they knew that there were no easy answers in China’s quest to find a modern identity. Here, then, are some of the people who made their lives in May Fourth Beijing and Shanghai.

Zou Taofen

Even now in China, he is often referred to just as ‘Taofen’. A little north of the top of Wangfujing, one of the more upmarket shopping streets in central Beijing, there is a branch of the Sanlian Bookstore named after him, and whose parent company he helped to found. His collected essays and selections of his works remain in
3. Zou Taofen.
Zou Taofen was the most prominent example of how writers in the new commercial print culture centred on Shanghai could create a popular media persona. His 'Readers' Mailbox' advice column helped propel *Life* magazine to record sales.

print. In the 1930s, he was a great inspiration to radical Marxist youth. Yet, so far, Zou Taofen (1895–1944), originally named Zou Enrun, has not received his full due as a central figure of the New Culture era. This may be because his activities during the 1920s took place in Shanghai, not Beijing. Or perhaps it is because those activities were not much concerned with the development of Marxist thought that occupied his contemporaries Chen Duxiu and Mao Zedong; when Zou did turn to Marxism in the 1930s, his previous activities were viewed (not least by himself) as a dilettante and irrelevant deviation from the really important issue of class struggle.
Yet to ignore Zou Taofen’s influence in the 1920s is to ignore a figure who both shaped the New Culture era and who reflected the many changes it made to China. Through Zou’s writings, hundreds of thousands, possibly millions, of men and women read about the changes in society and were given new ways to think about those changes. Through him, the ‘new culture’ became comprehensible as part of their lives.

Zou Taofen was born to a Fujianese local elite family in decline. His family lived on a mixture of his father’s undependable income and charity. Zou remembered that his and his two siblings’ ‘clothes and shoes were all made by my mother herself. She often received orders from outside the family to make women’s clothes for festivals, so she was always very busy’. When Zou was 12 years old, his mother died. Yet he managed to gain entry to St John’s University, one of the most exclusive missionary universities in Shanghai, although he had to do a variety of jobs to pay his tuition and keep. He used his time at college to develop a thirst for reading widely in English, and after graduation in 1921, his education opened a series of white-collar jobs for him. The major change that would shape his life came in 1926, when he was asked to take over the editorship of a small-circulation journal named Life Weekly [Shenghuo zhoukan; I will refer to it simply as Life]. The journal had been founded by the Chinese Society for Vocational Education, which had been set up by local notables in Shanghai and the surrounding Jiangnan area in 1913. The Society’s aim was to encourage ‘vocational youth’, primarily young men who wanted to move up into a lower middle-class professional stratum of society and feared most of all being pushed down into the labouring classes. Zou understood these readers. Although he had managed to obtain a full university education, a rare privilege indeed at the time, he recognized the difficulties of trying to educate oneself at the same time as needing to make a living. As we will see in this and the next chapter, Zou turned out to be one of those legendary editors who found out just what made their readerships laugh, cry, and, most importantly, come back the following week for more. In numerical terms, Life expanded from a circulation in 1926 of some 2,000, mostly given away free, to some 40,000 just three years later, with a doubling...
to perhaps 80,000 on the eve of the outbreak of the Manchurian crisis in 1931, and a record 200,000 by the time the magazine was shut down by Chiang Kaishek’s Nationalist government in 1933.23 At a time when each copy may have been read by between three and ten readers, this suggests a very significant circulation of ideas.

What a factual account of Zou’s life and times does not convey, however, is the sheer zest and enthusiasm with which he absorbed the wealth of new ideas about culture and politics which were flooding into China. As we will see, when thinking about how China could rescue itself from its current crisis, he brought up political thinkers as far apart as Gandhi and Kemal (Atatürk), business entrepreneurs such as George Eastman (the founder of Kodak) and Thomas Edison (discussed further in Chapter 3), and scientists and thinkers such as Louis Pasteur, Marie Curie, and Albert Einstein. Nor were these superficial portraits; many of them stretched over weeks as serials, and Zou came back to some particularly significant figures such as Gandhi many times over the years. Yet he did not restrict himself to consideration of abstract politics. His concern for his readers as real, troubled individuals led him to become an advice columnist, giving him a further opportunity to become known simply as ‘Taofen’ to a generation of young women and men coming of age in a time of opportunity and uncertainty.

Lu Xun

When a Chinese person is asked who was the foremost figure of the May Fourth era, or the greatest writer in modern China, they are as likely as not to mention Lu Xun. Lu Xun (1881–1936), the pen name of the writer Zhou Shuren, has practically become a patron saint in the People’s Republic of China. One can visit his old residences in Beijing and Shanghai, which are preserved as shrines, his pens and bed left behind as relics. Lu Xun himself would have been appalled at this: one of his explicit last wishes was that people should ‘Do nothing in the way of commemoration’ after his death.24 Lu Xun’s beatification was engineered in part by the League of Left-Wing Writers, a CCP-oriented literary organization of the 1930s, to portray him as a leftist writer who wrote on behalf of the masses. However, this
picture hides the reality of a much more complex, sardonic, and even at times nihilistic writer.

Lu Xun was born in Shaoxing in Zhejiang province. He grew up in a low-level elite family, and although he was given the traditional training in the Confucian classics that constituted the path to an official position in the bureaucracy, his father was an invalid and an opium addict, leading to the family’s slow impoverishment. Poverty forced Lu Xun to turn to the cheaper but less respectable westernized education which was then available in China, and, when aged 21, he went to Japan to train in medicine. Yet in the years leading up to his departure, Lu Xun had also been deeply impressed by the huge increase in foreign fiction appearing in translation in China. In particular, he became convinced that fiction was a powerful way to alert the country to the political crisis it faced; this idea was influenced by the wave of ‘reform fiction’ during Japan’s Meiji Restoration, which had itself drawn on writers such as Disraeli and Bulwer-Lytton. However, Lu Xun’s medical training was brought to a halt shortly
A TALE OF TWO CITIES

after the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War, which took place largely on Chinese territory, in 1904. It was not the war that prevented him studying. Rather, in his own account, it was an incident in class:

I have no idea what improved methods are now used to teach microbiology, but in those days we were shown lantern slides of microbes; and if the lecture ended early, the instructors might show slides of natural scenes or news to fill up the time. Since this was during the Russo-Japanese War, there were many war slides, and I had to join in the clapping and cheering in the lecture hall along with the other students. It was a long time since I had seen any compatriots, but one day I saw a newsreel slide of a number of Chinese, one of them bound . . . They were all sturdy fellows but looked completely apathetic . . . The one with his hands bound was a spy working for the Russians who was to be beheaded by the Japanese military as a warning to others, while the Chinese beside him had come to enjoy the spectacle.

Before the term was over I had left for Tokyo, because this slide convinced me that medical science was not so important after all. The people of a weak and backward country, however strong they might be, could only serve to be made examples of or as witnesses of such futile spectacles; and it was not necessarily deplorable if many of them died of illness. The most important thing, therefore, was to change their spirit; and since at that time I felt that literature was the best means to this end, I decided to promote a literary movement.25

This passage sums up much of what makes Lu Xun stand out in the largely sentimental, romantic, and sometimes kitsch world of modern Chinese literature: it is unsentimental and self-deprecating, but also filled with a genuine passion for ‘saving’ the Chinese nation. Yet it also shows the slightly chilling nature of Lu Xun’s vision in its throwaway comment that ‘it was not necessarily deplorable if many of them died of illness’. It is possible that Lu Xun did not mean this literally. Nonetheless, it is unsurprising, perhaps, that he started life as a trainee doctor: throughout his life, the tone he adopted was reminiscent in some way of a grizzled physician who continues to dole out pills and potions while becoming ever more cynical about the inability of his patients to learn from their errors. Throughout his writing career, Lu Xun offered a humanistic vision, but it was a weary, pessimistic one, very different from the brassy optimism or
multicoloured tragedy that informed the literary and political romantics of the left and right.

Lu Xun’s first attempts to save the nation through a redemptive literary movement were not an outstanding success. Of his first print run of 1,500 volumes of his short stories, around 40 copies were actually sold. Furthermore, despite his increasing disillusionment with traditional Chinese society, a disillusionment fuelled by the impoverished background from which he had arisen, he took part in a traditional arranged marriage. He continued to think about questions of culture and politics. One of his most suggestive pieces is ‘On the Power of Mara Poetry’ (1908), which identified the Buddhist god of destruction and rebellion, Mara, with poets who had rebelled against their own societies, such as the Hungarian Sandor Petöfi and the Pole Adam Mickiewicz.26 Lu Xun’s ‘Mara’ piece, inspired by Nietzsche and Ibsen, exalts the individual over the mass, but it is hardly a call for democracy: the mass of the people, he argued, are simply too inclined to conform under pressure to be able to offer any kind of way forward. This attitude was not dissimilar to the late Qing reformers, who despaired of the ‘people’ whom they were attempting to educate in the ways of constitutional reform; and there are echoes of it in the more elitist arguments used by some of the students in Tian’anmen Square in 1989.

It was only after 1915, when writing for the magazine New Youth [Xin qingnian], founded by Chen Duxiu, that Lu Xun began to make his mark. His finest short stories, such as ‘Kong Yiji’, ‘Diary of a Madman’, and ‘My Old Home’, appeared in this journal over the next few years. New Youth was a particularly significant publication, as it was also the showcase for the emerging Marxist thought of Chen Duxiu, Li Dazhao, and others who would go on to found the Chinese Communist Party.

During the height of the May Fourth Movement, the fact that Lu Xun was already coming up to 40 years old gave him an edge of experience and cynicism that prevented him sharing in the high hopes of the younger generation. Yet the May Fourth Movement and his name remain closely linked in the Chinese imagination to this day.
Ding Ling (1905–86) is probably the best-known woman writer of twentieth-century China, and, like Lu Xun, she has become a figure in the pantheon of May Fourth. Yet her determination to act on the promise of that era, and particularly the opportunities for freedom for women, meant that she ran into frequent, serious trouble, both with the Nationalist government, which executed her lover Hu...

Ding Ling's writing dealt frankly with female sexuality. Her most famous character, ‘Miss Sophie’, was a self-tormenting figure who found herself unable fully to express the longings she felt for the man she loved. Later in her life, Ding Ling would be condemned by the Communists for the ‘bourgeois’ concerns of her heroine.
Yepin, and the Communist Party, for which she worked over decades and which both fulfilled and betrayed her.

Ding Ling, the pseudonym of Jiang Bingzhi, was born into a moderately well-off landowning family in Anfu, Hunan province. Her father died when she was still a child, and she was deeply influenced by her mother, who left the family home to seek a modern education and succeeded in becoming a schoolteacher. Ding Ling, as a result of this influence, became precociously radical and enrolled at Shanghai University, an institution with a free-thinking, mostly left-wing faculty. She then moved to Beijing, where she attended Lu Xun’s classes, among others, and began to live in ziyou style with a young man, Hu Yepin. Both Hu and Ding Ling were aspirant writers, but her career soon far outshone his. In 1927, her first story, ‘Meng Ke’, the tale of a wide-eyed young rural girl who eventually becomes a Shanghai movie star but loses her innocence along the way, was a major success, leading to the publication the next year of perhaps her best-known piece, ‘The Diary of Miss Sophie’. This told the tale of a neurotic ‘modern’ young woman, who mentally tortures the people closest to her, and who is racked by self-loathing in the midst of a changing society which she embraces and yet dreads. Yet Hu and Ding Ling were still living in genteel poverty: even critically successful fiction did not bring in much cash.

In 1930, the couple’s lives changed radically. They had moved to Shanghai, where Hu Yepin joined the Communist Party, and while Ding Ling was kept in the dark about many of his activities, she could see that he was involved in any number of clandestine meetings and attempts to overthrow the Nationalist government, which had savagely purged its Communist allies in 1927. In January 1931, Ding Ling heard that Hu had been arrested at one of his secret meetings. The Shanghai Municipal Police had been tipped off about the gathering, which took place within the International Settlement, and Hu and the others captured that night were handed over to the Nationalist government’s police shortly afterwards. Frantic attempts to free him through appeals and bribes came to nothing: on the night of 7 February, Hu was executed by firing squad, along with 22 comrades. Ding Ling later wrote the story ‘A Certain Night’, a fictionalized account of
Hu’s death which portrayed him as a martyr for the Communist cause, and which saw her own entry into the Party in 1932. Her despair is summed up in the story’s last line: ‘When will it be light?’

Du Zhongyuan

Du Zhongyuan (1898–1944) made up for the short length of his life by the number of different roles he managed to squeeze into it. Journalist, political activist, businessman, porcelain enthusiast, inveterate traveller: for a brief period in the 1930s, he was one of the best-known journalistic voices in China. His greatest moment of fame came during the National Salvation movement of that era, when nationalist activists (in some cases in association with the Communist Party) lobbied Chiang Kaishek to change his policy of non-resistance to the increasing Japanese encroachment into North China. Between around 1930 and 1937, Du became one of the most prominent anti-Japanese, pro-resistance voices in China. He was given the platform of his mentor Zou Taofen’s mass-circulation publications, Life and its successors, and benefited from their readerships, which may well have reached 1.5 to 2 million at their peak.

Du’s outlook was heavily shaped by growing up in the imperial melting-pot that was Manchuria in the early twentieth century, and he was certainly not born as a sophisticate or cosmopolitan. He grew up in an impoverished village in Huaide county in Fengtian province, and was then sponsored by local elites to attend school and then college in Shenyang. He returned to Huaide to teach English in 1917, but the influence of the New Culture Movement on him had been strong during his college days, and he was inspired by the National Products Movement, which believed in encouraging people to buy Chinese rather than foreign goods, to move from teaching into business. He was particularly keen to set up rival business enterprises to those run by the Japanese, particularly the South Manchurian Railway (SMR) Company in the northeast. He later stated that porcelain, one of the products perhaps most archetypally associated with China, must be developed as a native product, regaining market share from the cheap Japanese imports that dominated the market. He scraped together investment to set up his first factory just outside Shenyang,
and by the late 1920s he was a prominent local businessman and official of the provincial Chamber of Commerce. From 1928 to 1931, the militarist ruler of Manchuria, Zhang Xueliang, included Du in the group of prominent young nationalists around him who were charged both with spreading propaganda against the Japanese presence in the region and with developing locally sponsored modernization projects in areas such as transport, education, and broadcasting. During this time, Du also got to know Zou Taofen, already by then a well-known journalist in Shanghai, and he started writing regularly
for Zou’s *Life* magazine. This would stand him in good stead in the 1930s as he tried to use his journalism to rally the nation against what he saw as the greatest threat facing it: the menace of Japanese aggression.

**Subcultures**

These four people, of course, cannot represent anything like the whole of the May Fourth generation. There were large numbers of subcultures, each with their own set of concerns and cliques. Two particular groups are worth mentioning here, if only to give a flavour of the wide range of thought that May Fourth opened up.

One subculture which would have lasting significance was that of the young leftist radicals, many of whom would go on in 1921 to found the Chinese Communist Party. Yet in the early years of the Republic, many of them were excited thinkers who had not yet come to a decision about how they would ‘save China’. It was some time before they even decided that they would be Marxists. One of the most significant was Chen Duxiu (1879–1942), a well-known radical academic who founded the magazine *New Youth*, and in doing so provided the most concrete forum for the New Culture Movement and its rejection of the Confucian past. It was in this journal that Chen put forward the slogan which has been associated ever since with May Fourth: what China needed, he argued, was ‘Mr Science’ and ‘Mr Democracy’. At the time, these terms were still in flux. Chen understood ‘science’ as a concrete, positivistic concept that could stand in stark opposition to Confucianism, and ‘democracy’ had the implication of a search for a new morality, rather than just a political system. Chen, like so many other thinkers of the time, was heavily influenced by Social Darwinist ideas, which seemed to him to explain the process through which China had become so fatally weakened.

Peking University was highly significant in crystallizing Chen’s thought and his ability to act on it, and, as discussed earlier in this chapter, the foundation of the Communist Party is closely linked to developments at the University in this period. Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao (1889–1927), the party’s co-founders, were respectively dean
of humanities and head librarian under Cai Yuanpei’s presidency, and they used the intellectual freedoms afforded by Cai’s pluralist regime to argue the case for a Marxist solution to China’s problems. The betrayal at Versailles which had angered their students now pushed Chen and Li towards Marxism, which they explored in *New Youth* and other journals in 1919–20. Other young radicals joined them, dissatisfied with the seeming collapse of stability and moral politics, and they met together in ‘study societies’ where theories of reform could be discussed. It would take much of the 1920s, the influence of the Soviet Comintern, and a radical change in political circumstances before the organized, disciplined CCP that the world later knew would appear.29

The founder member of the CCP who would go on to global fame was a young man from Hunan named Mao Zedong (1893–1976). Mao would later become the chairman of the Communist Party and the dominant leader in China for over a quarter of a century. Early in his life, he had rebelled against his father, a well-off farmer whom Mao deeply resented, and had moved to the city of Changsha around the time of the 1911 revolution. While there, he read widely in western as well as Chinese politics and philosophy, and became involved in a discussion group, the New Citizen Study Society. Mao became steadily more disillusioned by the breakdown of politics in the early Republic, and in 1920 declared that only a ‘Russian-style revolution’ could save China. At this time, Mao decided to move to Beijing, and although he was not a student at the university, he became actively involved in the study society convened by Li Dazhao, while working for Li as an assistant librarian.30

Not all the reformers turned to Marxism. Hu Shi (1891–1962), who had studied at Cornell and Columbia universities, joined the Peking University faculty and became a close friend and collaborator of Chen Duxiu’s. They agreed in particular about the need for China to adopt a more accessible form of the written language to promote mass literacy. Yet Hu was not enticed by the attractions of Marxism’s wide-ranging explanations, and wrote a famous set of articles entitled ‘Problems and -isms’ in 1919, in which he criticized those who ‘don’t study the standard of living of the ricksha coolie but rant

instead about socialism; . . . don’t study the ways in which women can be emancipated . . . but instead . . . rave about wife-sharing and free love’.31 Hu Shi was a liberal who would eventually move to the right politically, but at this time, he was an active member of the close, if sometimes fractious, political world that centred on the University.

Another subculture was formed by the writers of fiction. ‘May Fourth literature’ has become a recognized, almost clichéd term in the discussion of modern Chinese writing. Lu Xun and Ding Ling are among its best-known figures, despite the major differences in their writing style. But there was also what the critic Leo Lee has called the ‘romantic generation’. This included Xu Zhimo, Guo Moruo, and Mao Dun, whose works explode with individualistic energy. Rival literary factions were a constant feature of the era, with groups quarrelling with each other, often in the most bitter terms, in small-circulation journals.32

The intellectual differences between these groups and people were fiercely argued. But it is important to remember what held them together. All of them gravitated to Beijing or Shanghai, many of them spending time in both cities through the 1920s. All would have been familiar with the very different atmospheres of the two places. They would have wandered through the crowded backstreets near Coal Hill, behind the Forbidden City, or beyond the Qianmen gate in the centre of the city, buying snacks and spending endless hours in teahouses laughing, shouting, and arguing. Or else they would have been spending anxious moments getting in the manuscripts of the articles on the latest political or philosophical wonder – whether a reflection on Romantic poetry or a condemnation of patriarchal oppression of women – to the printers for the next edition of one of the ever-proliferating journals. Many of these people knew each other, and would continue contact throughout the century – those who survived it, anyway.

The spread of discontent during the 1989 Tian’anmen uprising in Beijing has been attributed in part to ‘campus ecology’ – lots of like-minded young men and women, based at universities in a small area of a major city.33 The ‘ecology’ of everyday life also explains a great deal about the New Culture generation. It explains how and why
they reacted to May Fourth, and why its effects stayed with them for so long afterwards, when the cityscapes and atmospheres in Beijing and Shanghai that had produced those effects had long since disappeared under the impact of war and revolution.

EXPERIMENTS IN HAPPINESS

Life and Love in New Culture China

Not every person’s natural intelligence or strength is equal. But if each person develops his mind towards service and morality . . . so as to contribute to the mass of humanity, then he can be regarded as equal. That is real equality.¹

Zou Taofen wrote this in an essay on the subject ‘What is equality?’ in 1927. Along with a host of other new concepts that entered Chinese thinking in the late Qing and early Republic, the theory of ‘equality’ was not always easy to put into practice, and Zou’s genius was in managing to explain such terms to his army of readers. People seemed self-conscious of living in ‘new times’, and the word ‘new’ was used by radical thinkers over and over again to emphasize that their time, the early twentieth century, was qualitatively different from everything that had gone before. However, this was not just empty rhetoric. At all levels of society, it became clear that the introduction of new ways of thought and living, and the influx of larger numbers of foreigners than had ever been seen before, was changing China forever. In a very short number of years, many of the fixed certainties of Chinese life were changed utterly: how people worked, what they read and wrote, and perhaps most importantly, how people related to one another — men and women, politicians and citizens, old and young, Chinese and foreign. Not everyone rejected the old Confucian hierarchies, but few could carry on everyday existence without admitting that the world in which those hierarchies had emerged had disappeared in little more
than half a century since the arrival of western imperialism. There was a change in culture – ‘culture’ in the sense of a system of mutual understandings, a society whose parts make sense in the context of each other, but which appears alien to those who have not been initiated into it. To understand ‘Chinese culture’ in the May Fourth era now meant that one had to cope with the reality of foreign ideas and goods, the new confidence of youth who would formerly have been deferential to the elderly, and of women who would have previously bowed down to men. The individual self, previously regarded as something to be downplayed in favour of a more collective identity, was now celebrated instead. These changes, initially condemned as foreign intrusions, were now part of being Chinese, and made up a ‘new culture’. The May Fourth demonstrations and the political demands that accompanied them were emblematic of that culture, but it spread far more widely than just the world of high politics.

For Chinese men and women in the New Culture era had jobs constructing the fine buildings that were a product of the capitalist, imperialist culture; they spent endless hours on factory lines, spinning cotton, at the mercy of rude and violent supervisors, in constant danger of being maimed or killed by unsafe and rickety equipment; and they wandered into parks, chatting with friends and keeping half an eye out for any decent-looking members of the opposite sex. The world of the workplace and the world of private life were both changed by the political and social revolution that came to China in the early twentieth century.

New Classes, New Opportunities

The rise of an industrial working class was one of the most notable features of the arrival of western capitalist modernity to China. One historian has assessed the number of workers, including employees in transportation, handicrafts, factories, and the service sector, as being over 500,000 in Shanghai, the most industrialized city in China, by 1919. The presence of this class would allow the Communist Party, founded in 1921, to make significant organizational advances in the
1920s, particularly after its alliance with the Nationalist Party of Sun Yatsen. However, this class had already begun to find its own sense of identity in the previous decades. From early in the century, these workers organized and protested or went on strike against intolerable working conditions, or took part in boycotts of foreign goods as a protest against western and Japanese imperialism. Other groups also emerged and developed during this period. Professional workers – teachers, doctors, lawyers – trained and carved out status for themselves. Another class, who perhaps judged themselves a shade below the professionals but above the working classes, was the group known at the time as the xiao shimin, sometimes translated as ‘petty urbanites’. Small shopkeepers, clerks, and office workers, these members of a self-defined ‘respectable’ lower middle class were often just a few steps away from economic disaster and descent into the feared world of the lumpen poor. All these groups were, of course,

7. A tank patrols in the French Concession, Shanghai, around 1927.
Tensions were high as the Northern Expedition of united Nationalist and Communist forces marched on Shanghai. The foreign powers prepared to be attacked, but Chiang Kaishek decided against provoking them.
miles away from the world of the genuinely rich, the factory-owners and entrepreneurs.⁴

In all these groups, a notable feature was the rise of women workers. Some working-class occupations, such as dock work and construction, were the preserve of men, but in other areas, such as the cotton mills, women workers were in the great majority. Among professionals, too, women lawyers and teachers emerged for the first time. However, the entry of women into the working sphere was a major social shift. The structures that underpinned Confucian society gave women very little space to become autonomous workers or social actors in their own right. In the most physical sense, they were tied to the home by their bound feet, and it was only in the late nineteenth century that footbinding was phased out (though it continued in some rural areas into the Republican era).⁵ More widely, patriarchal structures made the idea of women seeking their own professions somehow unseemly. Women had not, prior to the twentieth century, been universally forbidden from entering traditionally male spheres: for instance, local elite families in certain parts of China had for centuries encouraged female education. But the wider spread of education and opportunities for women emerged in the late Qing and early Republic, as the concept of the ‘New Woman’ began to emerge. It was an elite idea; New Women did not become factory workers, but instead sought professional status, which might in aspiration be journalism or law but in reality was more likely to be work in an office. Still, the spirit of the age gave women, like men, a chance to dream. Zhu Su’e, who would become one of China’s first women lawyers, remembered that, when she refused to have her feet bound by her mother, who then said that Zhu would never find a husband, she replied: ‘Fine! If I can’t be married out, that will be fine . . . I will support myself.’ And her family proved less narrow-minded than she had feared, allowing her to go to law school.⁶ Zou Taofen, as ever a maker as well as mirror of current mores, had included among his role models for his lower middle-class readers the scientist Marie Curie, along with Einstein and Pasteur.⁷ But for most of his readers, a high-school education was a dream, and university education a fantasy.
For factory workers, conditions were harsh, but also provided a chance to make friends and enjoy the odd entertainment. The historian Emily Honig has reconstructed the working day of women in the Shanghai cotton mills. The factory whistle would sound at 5.30 a.m., and at the gates, one could see ‘women hobbling on bound feet, women wearing cloth shoes, and women wearing high heels… old women with buns and young women with braids, short bobbed hair or even a permanent wave’. The working day was heavily regulated, with even toilet breaks run on a quota system. The work itself was heavy and destructive: Yu Rong, a worker whose job it was to place silk cocoons into cauldrons of boiling water, found that ‘our hands would swell up every night. So we would go to the medicine store and buy an ointment. We would put that on and wrap up our hands. They would hurt and hurt at night.’ Even the women’s weekly rest day would probably be taken up with family duties. Yet there was sometimes an opportunity to slip out and enjoy street theatre or operas. Mill-worker Chen Zhaodi remembered that when she needed time out, ‘I would not tell my family where I was going. My mother-in-law would never have let me go. I just went secretly.’

Another profoundly important and symbolic change in the May Fourth era was the new stress on youth. ‘Youth’ had become a catchword in many of the liberation movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Europe, among them Young Ireland and the Young Turks. The destruction of much of Europe’s youth in World War I led to an even greater focus on the virility and power of the young on the part of the new Soviet and fascist regimes, which started to shape their ideologies in the wake of the conflict. In China, too, the overturning of Confucian norms of veneration for the old meant that the young were now given opportunities to explore the modern world and their individual selves in an unprecedented way. One of the most prominent articles, written in 1915 at the start of the New Culture Movement by Chen Duxiu, was entitled ‘Call to Youth’, and was published in his own journal, the symbolically entitled New Youth.

But even during this great inversion of pre-existing values, aspects of the old norms were visible. In the old Confucian world, students
had traditionally been given a certain amount of leeway to express criticism of those in authority. Education conferred not just knowledge, but moral weight as well. The division between high school and university students was not as well defined as in the west, and therefore many of the great student demonstrations of the era actually involved children in their mid-teens, with all the determination, exuberance, and irresponsibility that that implies. (Those qualities would come to light in sinister fashion during the Cultural Revolution half a century later: see Chapter 6.) In the May Fourth era, this indulgence towards the young continued even when the students took part in activities which Confucian thought frowned upon, such as the violent beating of Zhang Zongxiang and burning of Cao Rulin’s house during the 1919 May Fourth demonstration. Even the students who were detained afterwards were released after the President of Peking University interceded for them, and the authorities also showed their understanding of the special status students had by agreeing to their release. (Although there was far less violence in the 1989 demonstrations in Tian’anmen Square, a similar double standard operated then: the students who were arrested were generally treated much more leniently than the workers’ leaders who had also been instrumental in organizing the demonstrations.)

Many aspects of everyday life for all classes stayed constant or similar to what had come before. Chinese religious practice, which had underpinned so much of life for centuries, no longer provided a chain that led from the emperor all the way down to the ordinary farmer or villager. Yet people continued to worship at temples, respect ancestral shrines, and also take part in periodic waves of enthusiasm for Buddhist or Taoist folk religion – often to the rage of modernizing nationalists who felt that religion, which they termed ‘superstition’, was yet another ‘feudal’ aspect of a China that should be left behind. However, there was no doubt that the very structure of Chinese society, particularly in the cities, had changed irrevocably, and it was generally the young who found themselves able to take up the opportunities that had opened up. For the first, and perhaps the last time, there were no older role models in China who could tell them what to expect or how to behave in the new world.
With conventional veneration for age being overturned in favour of a cult of youth, this was an intoxicating time for many. This explains why the role of someone like Zou Taofen, setting himself up as an advice columnist, was so important to this generation, who had so few places to turn in their quest to understand the changes in society.

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Print, Commerce, and Culture

The interaction between technology, language, and culture was a large part of what made the New Culture so new. The era brought together the technical possibility of mass-market publication of periodicals and newspapers with linguistic reforms that popularized a simpler, easier language in which the published material could be read even by people who were not highly literate.

The arrival of print technology had led, in the late Qing, to the emergence of western-style newspapers which appeared initially in the treaty ports. The first such newspaper, Shenbao, was edited by the Englishman Ernest Major in the International Settlement of Shanghai, but it was soon followed by many others: by 1912, there were some 500 daily newspapers in China, and over 600 by 1928, with Shanghai and Beijing boasting around 40 to 50 each.\(^\text{10}\) Print culture helped to shape Shanghai modernity in particular.\(^\text{11}\) The intensely commercial rivalry between the papers led to various innovations, of which supplements containing new fiction were among the most important. Along with daily newspapers came weekly and monthly periodicals. These could be specialized, dealing with particular political or literary debates or quarrels. Others had wider circulations, such as Life or the Fiction Monthly [Xiaoshuo yuebao]. Mass fiction took off as well. As in nineteenth-century England and America, popular novels were often issued in serial form in the weeklies or monthlies before being reissued as books in their own right. This was big business: one of the bestselling authors of the era, Zhang Henshui, managed to extend the circulation of Xinwen bao, the newspaper that serialized his most famous novel, Fate in Tears and Laughter (1929), to around 150,000.\(^\text{12}\)

These magazines helped to shape minds far beyond the cities in which they were produced. Zhu Su’e, who grew up in the small city of Changzhou, remembered in an interview with the historian Wang Zheng: ‘I learned the world nüquan [women’s rights] from reading new magazines after the May Fourth movement . . . I decided to leave home to study so that nobody could control me. That is how I came to Shanghai in the fall of 1919 – all because those magazines made me feel Changzhou was a small place, and I wanted to see the big world.’\(^\text{13}\)
The fact that such a large readership was available was in significant part due to one particular strand of the New Culture: language reform. Radical thinkers such as Hu Shi argued that part of China’s inability to abandon the Confucian past was caused by the fact that the traditional classical style of writing was still used for most ‘respectable’ purposes such as composing official government documents. Hu regretted that the vernacular style of writing, which was much closer to the spoken language and therefore easier for most people to learn, was still largely restricted to ‘vulgar’ forms such as popular plays or sensational novels. In fact, the situation was more complex than this rather black-and-white portrayal of language usage would suggest, and simplified written forms were already used more widely than Hu admitted. But it remains the case that one of the greatest victories of the New Culture Movement was the official embrace and popularization of vernacular written Chinese within less than two decades. In a sense, it is a tribute to how quickly the language reformers’ ideas caught on that the classical language, so long the mainstay of official Chinese culture, became a secondary, and after 1949, largely ignored cultural resource in China. The spread of written vernacular Chinese was aided in large part by the ever-greater availability of mass publishing; and mass publishing, in turn, was stimulated by the spread of a language which made it easier for readers to access written material. The cultural changes of the era were strongly shaped by the permanent shift in the linguistic resources in which they were expressed, even if that victory was not as total as the May Fourth legend would later suggest.

Love, Labour, and Liberty

Perhaps it is in the area of the new possibilities for love that the May Fourth era really belonged to the young. Of course, there were many older people who found new spouses and lovers in the turmoil of those years, but this was the generation that had the first and fullest chance to think about the end of the extended family and arranged marriages, and explore romance (a concept originally translated phonetically as luó-mán-tí-ke) and, more daringly, ideas of more
anarchic ‘free love’. It was not for nothing that the Nationalists, when they turned to cultural conservatism, attacked the Communists with the slogan ‘property in common, wives in common’. (The Chinese term for ‘Communist’, gongchan, literally translates as ‘common property’.) The association of spouse-swapping with Marxist dialectics and land redistribution, while not entirely fair, is a good indication of the daring nature of the ideas which the era had thrown up.

As with many other cultural understandings of the period, the idea of ‘romance’ and ‘love’ in the westernized ‘Romantic’ sense of being individualistic, passionate, and self-centred was created in large part in the Chinese mind through western templates which were then adapted. Romantic solipsism was also the basis for one of the first pieces of modern fiction by a woman to achieve fame in China. ‘Miss Sophie’s Diary’ [Shafei nushi de riji], by Ding Ling, was published in 1928. It was not Ding Ling’s first published success, but it is in retrospect perhaps her best-remembered story. Even the name of the protagonist is symbolic. ‘Sophie’ (or ‘Shafei’ in the Chinese transliteration) is clearly a westernized name, and it furthermore brings to mind the Russian anarchist revolutionary Sofía Perovskaya, who had been an inspiration to many of the Chinese revolutionaries and anarchists of the late Qing. Yet the story’s protagonist is not politically committed; rather the reverse. The narrative is fairly static, covering Sophie’s diary entries from December to March. Sophie is suffering from tuberculosis (another western romantic theme), and lives alone in a small room. She is attended by various friends, including a would-be boyfriend named Wei, whom she simultaneously leads on and tortures mentally by refusing to respond to his gestures of affection. When he weeps, Sophie replies: “Save your tears,” I said, “and don’t think I’m weak like other women who can’t resist a tear. If you want to cry, go back home to cry. Tears get me down.”’

Yet the story also suggests that Sophie’s capriciousness is a product of the difficulty of dealing with the concept of ‘love’ which faced all Chinese youth (urban, cosmopolitan youth, anyway) at that time:

These days young people like talking about ‘love’ whenever they’re together. Even though I may know a little about it I can’t really explain
it when it comes down to it. I think I know perfectly well about those little movements that men and women make together. Perhaps it’s just because I know about those movements that I’m so confused about ‘love’ . . . that I’m suspicious of what the world calls ‘love’ and of the love I’ve received.17

The story also deals with sexual longing in a way that had not been publicly discussed before: ‘I can’t control the surges of wild emotion, and I lie on this bed of nails of passion, which drive themselves into me whichever way I turn. Then I seem to be in a cauldron of oil . . . as my whole body is scalded.’ Her fantasies also show the cosmopolitanism of the era. Speaking of the man whom she adores from afar, she says: ‘I dreamt of a man with the manner of a mediaeval European knight. Anyone who’s seen Ling Jishì will realize how appropriate the comparison is. He combines it with the special gentleness of the East.’

Sophie eventually decides, in a fit of self-loathing, to leave Beijing and go south ‘to waste what’s left of my life where nobody knows me’.15 In later years, Ding Ling would join the Communist Party, and during the ‘rectifications’ of the 1940s, and in the crackdowns on ‘bourgeois thought’ of the early People’s Republic, ‘Miss Sophie’ was one of the characters brought back to haunt her by angry commissars, who disapproved of what they saw as the character’s individualism and self-obsession. Ding Ling was herself radicalized by the execution of her lover, Hu Yepin, by the Nationalist government in 1931. She moved to writing more ideologically committed, though still in some ways ambivalent, fiction, and in later years seemed to have some doubts about the solipsistic way in which she had portrayed Sophie.19 Yet she had created a character who summed up many of the complications of an era when individual desires came into conflict with a still-evolving cultural framework.

But Sophie was fictional. Were there real Sophies? How did women and men deal with the reality of the new freedoms that had emerged with the Republic?
As with so many other questions, freedom was in large part a question of social class. If one were among the tiny elite who won entrance to the prestigious halls of Peking University, then, as the writer Zhu Haitao recalled, there were opportunities to carve out new and unsupervised ways to live:

If you wanted to live in college, you could (though you had to have a way to get a room). If you wanted to live in a house, you could. If you wanted to live with a lover in an apartment block, you could. If you wanted to eat rice, you could. If you just wanted to eat cold snacks, you could . . . And if you wanted to go to classes, you could. If you didn’t want to go to classes, you didn’t have to. If you wanted to go to classes you liked and not go to ones you didn’t, then that was absolutely fine! In other words, everything was as you liked it \[suiyi\].

But for the vast majority even of the increasingly literate lower middle class and working classes, even school-level education was still a privilege, particularly for women, and college-level education was rare indeed. The still-developing boundaries of the new environments for work and leisure which the emergence of capitalist, imperialist modernity had brought to China were not yet clear. However, the majority of city-dwellers in Beijing or Shanghai were less able to throw off all the weight of past conventions and customs, even if they had wanted to. One window we have into the way in which they tried to puzzle out the way that they should behave in the transition between the old and new worlds is the lively ‘Readers’ Mailbox’ [Duzhe xinxiang] section of Life magazine, where editor-publisher Zou Taofen took on the role of advice columnist to puzzled young women and men who wrote to ask him about the new mores.

The letters cover a wide range of topics, but a recurring theme for readers of both sexes was that they found it hard to know the new boundaries, particularly when the worlds of work and love overlapped. Take a letter from 1931. You Mei, a 19-year-old, had joined an office the previous year. “This was the first time I had worked somewhere else, especially together with men, and I couldn’t help but feel...
timid and shy.’ But with an elderly mother at home to support, she had no choice. At first, things went fine, and You Mei’s colleagues were helpful and made her feel comfortable. But then one senior colleague started to become rather too helpful. He asked her out, and started sending her ardent letters. As You Mei was already betrothed to somebody, she tried to discourage him discreetly, not wanting to cause either one of them embarrassment in the workplace. ‘I’m in a situation where I don’t know what to do,’ she wrote, ‘I don’t even want to look at him – I can only deal with it by faking illness or stupidity.’ Yet he continued to come over and chat to her at closing time, arranged work details so that the two of them were working together, or used his influence to release You Mei from less desirable tasks. ‘How I wish I could escape this pit of torment! But I can’t find a good position – that is, in a different place, it would [still] be difficult to avoid this sort of problem, and who will support my old mother and our household expenses?’ She concluded: ‘Sir! If I can maintain my current attitude and [show] not the tiniest bit of feeling toward him, will there be any problem for my reputation or status? I don’t have much experience, so can I ask you . . . to find a good way to deal with this situation?’

A letter on a similar issue, but this time from a man, was published in the same year. Cai Zhiji wrote in on behalf of a colleague of his who was an English teacher at a college. The English teacher had written a note (in English) to Miss Wang, a student in his class, suggesting that they should have a liaison. Miss Wang promptly took the note to the principal. If she wasn’t interested, asked the writer, couldn’t Miss Wang have just ignored the letter? Wasn’t it rude and rash of her to have done what she did? A follow-up letter came in the next edition, from a fellow female student of Miss Wang’s, Zhu Min, who disagreed strongly with the previous writer. Using the type of scientific metaphor which flavoured the period, she declared:

If you want to know whether seeking love is a serious matter or not, then you definitely can’t skimp on attempts, and should look upon it as doing an experiment, turning the other party into your experimental sample. Success in the experiment would be unexpected happiness; failure would be unhappiness, but not unexpected.”

The rosy-eyed view of scientific experiment, teamed in the May Fourth mindset with ‘democracy’ as a panacea for China’s crisis, was a common one at the time, encouraged by Chen Duxiu’s widely circulated call for ‘Mr Science and Mr Democracy’ to save China. Yet even in this scientific spirit, it was important to stick to proper morality (daode). The school, Zhu Min explained, was coeducational, but in fact there was little mixing between girls and boys, and even less between staff and pupils of the opposite sex. Now,

Mr Zhang was a newly-arrived English teacher this term . . . During that time, aside from [Miss Wang] nodding her head in the English class when her name [was called], and him seeing her face, there was no contact or conversation between them, and naturally no way for him to know anything about any aspect of her. They had no deep acquaintance, no mutual contact, but because he saw Miss Wang play the leading role in the play during the twentieth anniversary celebrations of the school, which won much applause from the audience, . . . Mr Zhang wrote a love-seeking letter to Miss Wang. Now, may I ask, is this a reasonable and appropriate way of seeking love?

No, Zhu Min concluded, it was not. Miss Wang was quite right to let the principal know about this.

The point of the ‘Readers’ Mailbox’ was not just for readers to air their problems, but to let Zou Taofen give them the benefit of his advice. His answers were generally liberal-minded, but they were tinged by a realistic pessimism. To You Mei, he pointed out first of all,

A girl who’s betrothed should not have to avoid friends of the opposite sex. The important thing is to be careful as to whether the friend you are making is a righteous person, whether or not he is a person of upright character . . . Getting close to male colleagues is not in itself a bad thing, if it is done with cooperation and respect. But if they do not know how to behave with dignity, then this is a very dangerous place to be, and for the sake of your whole life’s happiness, it’s best that you make definite plans to leave.

It may be, Zou went on, that You Mei’s suitor did not realize that she was betrothed, and had only honourable, if unprofessional, intentions towards her. But ‘perhaps he already has a wife, and sees you as a toy’.

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At any rate, ‘you should honestly let him know [about your betrothal], explaining that being friends is fine, but you don’t want to go outside the zone of friendship’. If he still refused to hear the message, though, Miss You would seriously have to think about leaving. ‘I can’t hide,’ said Zou gloomily, ‘that you’ve got something of a crisis, in that you’ve settled a marriage, and if your bridegroom-to-be hears about this, perhaps this could raise further complications and cause a lot of vexation for you.’

It was not that Zou approved of the patriarchy, although he still reflected many of its assumptions. Rather, he felt he should tell his readers that they could not yet escape its effects, regardless of the kind of new-style lives they were living. It was unfair that You Mei, and not her harasser, would have to move; but it would be a greater economic disaster to lose her ‘reputation’ and her fiancé along with it. Zou acknowledged that some people would attack him for claiming that much of the talk of more open relations between men and women was in fact a ‘false mask’ for predatory men: ‘perhaps you will curse my thought as being behind the times’. Yet,

on the men’s side, they can take advantage of the opportunity of open social relations between men and women so as to advance their selfish desires, and the happiness through her whole life of the woman who is sacrificed does not come into the consideration of this sort of selfish man out for his own advantage.

In short, ‘I positively advocate men and women interacting socially,’ but ‘if we want men and women openly to relate socially, then men must seriously respect these two conditions toward women; first, they must pay attention to the happiness that she expects for her whole life; second, they must respect her free will.’ The historian Wen-hsin Yeh has pointed out that Zou’s attitude towards love was clear: ‘Do not seek happiness at the expense of others. Do not send false signals during courtship. Always take full responsibility for what you have done.’

One reader’s letter from 1930 shows the limitations which Zou felt, in practice, still applied to women in this new world:
The evening of the day before yesterday, my sister and I, along with a couple of fellow-suffering girlfriends, who had recently graduated, went for a walk together in the park along the Bund. Because all our feet were exhausted, we found a bit of grass (because all the deckchairs were already taken). We sat down and talked about our happy life at school, and how sad it was to have graduated, but we hadn’t been there more than twenty minutes when we wanted to get up and go. But there wasn’t the tiniest path to let us go; we had been surrounded on all four sides by nasty men. Ah! Ya! Young and scared as I was, I couldn’t help crying out. My two girlfriends comforted me, saying: ‘Don’t be afraid, see how it goes, let’s just sit here a while.’ As we didn’t want to go yet, we kept sitting there, but soon, we could hear them, one saying, ‘What a lovely scent!’ . . . (In fact, we weren’t wearing any scents or powders, it was just their fabrication.) When we’d heard a lot of inappropriate banter, and couldn’t bear any more, we replied to them in a warning tone: ‘It’s not too late to keep your dignity!’ ‘If any foreigners see you, won’t you look like fools to them? Won’t you be causing bad luck to the country?’ ‘Ah! This really makes me sigh!’

Finally, the exasperated and slightly scared young women burst through the cordon of young men and went to sit somewhere quieter. But within ten minutes, their persecutors had returned to haunt them. ‘What’s more, this time, we couldn’t understand their conversation, as these were boys somewhat older than us who were able to speak English.’ The ladies finally made a run for it, only to find that they were being chased, and were saved only by meeting a group of friends, after which they were able to get safely home.

‘Wise sir,’ Miss Zhu quizzed Taofen,

I am a young and ignorant girl . . . Were these men’s brains really filled with any [sense]? . . . Our admonitions spurred them on, and everything [we said] just stimulated them more. In discussing their education, it was as if they wanted to raise themselves above our level, and they could even speak English! Surely their families, their schools, all had taught them that one’s behaviour should not be unreasonable? Or was it their intention to make friends with us? (Because people have been saying that men and women are now equal, what does it mean to make friends?)

Sexual harassment, to use an anachronistic phrase, was not invented in China during the May Fourth era. Crowds thronging public places (not generally parks, which did not exist as public
spaces until the nineteenth century) are recorded throughout Chinese history. But this account is very much part of the New Culture experience. For a start, before the advent of mass literacy and modern periodical publishing, a concept such as the ‘Readers’ Mailbox’ would not have been practical. But Miss Zhu’s attempt to get to grips with what had happened in the park was suffused with the misunderstandings that the new culture had brought in its wake. First, there was the mantra that ‘men and women are now equal’. Yet it was not clear what form that this equality was supposed to take. Would the young men harassing Miss Zhu and her friends have said that ‘free love’ meant that they now had the right to woo as they wished, without constraints? It is Miss Zhu herself, after all, who puts

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Until 1941, this waterfront street stood in the middle of the British-dominated International Settlement. The city’s foreign concessions had an ambivalent role, simultaneously rubbing in the imperialist domination of China’s greatest seaport, but also providing a picture of technological modernity seductive to many Chinese.

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forward this explanation for their boorish behaviour. Perhaps she thought that they had been reading too much about Miss Sophie's unrequited longings and hoped to save other young women from her fate. Also, progressive bandwagons in modern China, as elsewhere, have always had various fellow-travellers who take on the label without sharing the agenda. For many young men, no doubt the idea of ‘new women’ who could be treated like men (rather a different thing from equality, of course) was a powerful piece of fantasy. A rather gentler, but indicative example of this was a story by Ding Ling’s lover, Hu Yepin, entitled ‘Living Together’, in which a peasant woman living in the CCP-controlled Jiangxi base area leaves her husband of several years, and starts living with another man instead; the husband acquiesces without any fuss.\footnote{Hu’s story was a fiction taken to an extreme, of course: but in general, cultural norms and boundaries of understanding about what post-Confucian relations between urban men and women should be like were in flux during this period.}

The other cultural change that emerges from this letter is the importance of the foreign. First, the park itself is significant: the park along the Bund in Shanghai was the Shanghai Municipal Gardens, located in the International Settlement, which was run by a colonial Municipal Council, mainly British. Until 1928, the park had not admitted Chinese, so it was a new and sweet experience for Miss Zhu and her friends actually to go there, as well as a small victory over imperialism and racism. It also explains why they thought that it might be effective to admonish the young men by asking them to consider what foreigners would think if they could see them. The idea that such behaviour would give strength to European scorn for the Chinese was clearly powerful. The reverse side of this is the detail that on their second attempt to ‘make friends’, the men tried to show that they were a cut above the girls by speaking English. The supposed dash of sophistication that came from this not particularly casual dropping of their linguistic ability backfired here, of course: Miss Zhu sensibly thought that such well-educated boys should know how to behave better. Students at any time in Chinese history, after all, might well be patriotic, politically engaged, and with their
minds on higher things. However, in the 1920s as in the 1980s, they were also capable of being boorish and foolish.

Zou Taofen’s reply reflects the limited options which he felt were available. ‘This situation,’ he fumed, ‘is nothing but hooligan behaviour, and if some of them had the appearance of students, their behaviour still runs along the same path as hooligans.’ He observed that this kind of behaviour does not just take place in parks, or just in China, though in other countries, ‘society and the police’ would stop it.

But in China, this group of shameless types . . . dares to call themselves by the name of ‘new people,’ as with what Miss Zhu has cited as this brazen [justification that] ‘Men and women are equal,’ and so on, which is an example of this . . . To take oppressive behaviour towards women and call it equality, where is the ‘fairness’ in this? \(^{31}\)

He then told Miss Zhu not to give these layabouts the benefit of the doubt just because of their education. However, his solution was hardly a very feminist one, although perhaps a practical one in the circumstances: he proposed that women should make sure they had a male escort (the word ‘escort’ appears in English type in the Chinese text) in all unsafe places.

It is clear that the pious declarations of ‘female liberation’ which reformers of the era put forward led to real difficulties in practice. Without citing it, Zou’s replies continually echoed the argument of one of Lu Xun’s most famous essays, inspired by a reading of Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*. In the play, the protagonist, Nora, ends up leaving her husband and family after realizing that she will never have any status in her own right until she does. Lu Xun’s essay, however, asked: ‘What happens after Nora leaves home?’, and it was clear that the answer was bleak, at least when applied to China as it was in the early twentieth century. Without major change in the patriarchal structures of Chinese society, Lu Xun argued, it was not nearly enough for an individual woman to declare herself ‘free’. Reality would deny her that freedom. Zou also declared that one aspect of that freedom, women’s education, was becoming more widespread, with more opportunities for women to find jobs and to mix with men in open
society. This was all most welcome. But during this time of transition, he went on, ‘the defeat of the old views is not sufficient [in] people’s minds, and a new morality has not yet been nurtured’. There would inevitably be people sacrificed along the way, he warned, and the most important thing was to make sure that those sacrifices were as minimal as possible. His advice both to You Mei and to Cai Zhiji was similar: men should respect women’s free will, and women should be aware that the devastating pace of change on the surface of Chinese society did not mean that the underlying structures had yet shifted all that much. Sometimes this led Zou into moral relativism. The new relaxation on ‘making friends’ between the sexes did not mean that men should use this to pressure women into ‘what ordinary people would call “keeping a mistress,” for a forced mistress is much more blameworthy than having a mistress by mutual consent’.

The phenomenon was hardly restricted to China, of course. The ‘free love’ of American youth culture in the mid-1960s gave way by the end of the decade to a women’s liberation movement that wondered whether giving young men the freedom to sleep with a plethora of women was necessarily an advance from the stultification and hypocrisy of the 1950s. As we will see, the experience of the young women in the May Fourth era was echoed in the 1980s. In the former case, people were groping to find a ‘new morality’ after escaping the confines of the Confucian social norms. In the 1980s, it was the equally sexually prurient and hierarchical Cultural Revolution that people sought to overcome. But in both cases, the transition period was as difficult as Zou had warned.

The tone of the letters from these correspondents are typical of the May Fourth era in one respect: they are full of anxiety. But in another sense, the anxiety of the producers of the New Culture was not the same as the anxiety of its consumers. The New Culture radicals were worried about China being held back from entering the modern world, and resented old customs and ways of thinking that prevented China’s progression. Young men and women reading Life were also concerned about finding ways to take up new opportunities in work and love: yet it was not just the burden of old customs holding China back that was the major problem for them. Rather, their
anxiety was tied to their struggle in trying to deal with a changing and unpredictable new world. For them, the neon lights, the new sexual mores and gender relations, the urge to save China, were all worrying, and not necessarily inspirational. The extent of this anxiety is suggested by the kind of writing that sold best during this period. It was not in fact what would become the ‘classic’ texts of the May Fourth era: Lu Xun, Ding Ling, Mao Dun. Instead, the best-selling literature of the time was an escapist fiction known as ‘Mandarin Duck and Butterfly’ writing, named after traditional Chinese symbols of eternal love. The topics of these novels were usually stories of star-crossed lovers, hair-raising escapades, or comic vignettes. They were intended to entertain rather than to stretch the reader.

Much of this writing has not lasted, partly because it has been shut out of the approved canon of ‘great books’ created by the influence of May Fourth, and partly because much of it is repetitive and unengaging. Yet there are some works that stand out, and one of those is Zhang Henshui’s *Fate in Tears and Laughter* [Tixiao yinyuan]. The novel has a long and picaresque plot. One of its notable features, however, is the two women who are rivals for the affections of the hero, Fan Jiashu. One of them, Shen Fengxi, is a traditional Chinese street-entertainer. The other, Helena Ho (He Lina), is the westernized daughter of a bureaucrat, who insists that Fan call her ‘Miss Ho’ in English. Helena is something of a figure of fun in the novel, and it is clear that Zhang Henshui was creating a sort of sly complicity with his readership, who were intended to laugh at this humorous portrayal of a Chinese girl who took on not just western manners, but even a western name. ‘Miss Sophie’ was intended as a figure of romantic tragedy; ‘Miss Helena’ was the butt of a joke. Miss Helena, of course, was also created by a man, Miss Sophie by a woman, but the romantic comedy of *Fate in Tears* was aimed at women as well as men.

The social background of these readers is important to understand the appeal of writings such as *Fate in Tears* or the ‘Readers’ Mailbox’. These readers were the ‘petty urbanites’, the urban lower middle class, scrabbling for respectability. They were often internal migrants
from China’s smaller inland towns who had come to Shanghai, and now had a precarious respectability as small merchants, clerks, or teachers. In a country with no government support network, and where they might be separated from traditional family networks located back in the provinces, they dreaded any sudden changes that might lead to them losing their jobs and falling into the awful commonality of ‘the masses’. For them, literature mocking the more obvious aspects of modernity and modern living was a source of comfort. Rather than feeling like bumpkins or fools for not embracing the more frightening aspects of modernity, this fiction told them, it was permissible to laugh at the excesses of foolish behaviour that modern living caused in its most ardent advocates. The political activist Du Zhongyuan, writing in the mid-1930s for this same audience, once sought a shorthand way to sum up the silliness of young radicals he had met in his own youth. He did it by describing them as sporting an exotic, laughable style of dress, wearing ‘swallowtail beards and foreign leather shoes’.34 Du’s readers, people such as Miss Zhu, the young woman who was harassed in the park, were aware of the new possibilities open to them; but in those opportunities there was also the scent of danger.

The May Fourth Entrepreneur

The May Fourth era was about being radical, but that radicalism could take many forms. One of the most potentially powerful new role models was the idea of the entrepreneur, who used learning from abroad to make a fortune. Lu Xun had written of how his mother had wept when she heard he wanted to go to Japan and study medicine: ‘That she cried was only natural, for at that time the proper thing was to study the classics and take the official examinations. Anyone who studied “foreign subjects” was a social outcast . . .’35 Lu Xun, of course, abandoned his scientific training to write fiction after his epiphany in Japan. But similar sentiments were expressed by two other writers, Du Zhongyuan and Zou Taofen, both of whom engaged with entrepreneurialism, but in rather different ways.

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The 1920s saw Zou Taofen become one of the first media moguls in modern China as editor and publisher of Life. Zou was very much a figure of the May Fourth era, just 26 years old at the time of the 1919 student demonstrations in Beijing. However, it was in Shanghai that he was to make his name. Rather than the agonized introspection of the literary and philosophical circles centred on Peking University, Zou and his associates breathed the commercial air of Shanghai and made a rather different sort of May Fourth for themselves. Zou’s cosmopolitanism cannot be doubted, but even though this insatiably curious young man had such a wide variety of role models to offer his readers, it was the business geniuses who seemed to have won his heart. As with other aspects of the New Culture, the idea of patriotic entrepreneurs was not new in the 1920s. Zhang Jian of Nantong, near Shanghai, was just one of the late Qing businessmen who combined the new industrial culture with a social and political agenda, becoming one of the largest cotton mill owners as well as a prominent figure in public life in the late nineteenth century. During that era, there was a lively debate about the extent to which China needed to industrialize and encourage the growth of capitalism, and this discussion became more widespread in the twentieth century. Yet there was still something of a cultural prejudice against this particular path to modernity in the May Fourth era. Therefore, Zou took the opportunity to proselytize for entrepreneurship, and to give publicity to the foreign mentors who he felt could show the way forward for China.

In June 1926, Zou wrote a three-part feature on the life and achievements of the American inventor Thomas A. Edison, who had just turned 80. The morals drawn from his life were designed to encourage readers to be inspired to hard work and entrepreneurship. ‘There were many occasions,’ noted Zou of Edison, ‘that he did eighteen hours’ work a day over seven days: many ordinary people, he went on, would have had to live over a hundred years or more to match his energy. ‘So how is Edison doing now? Does he want to stop work and relax? No! No! He still has a lot of things he wants to invent to benefit the world . . . This man really deserves the title, “The most useful old man in the world”’. Edison’s life story is related for the edification of readers: this was a poor young man who spent his last
dollar on a ticket from Boston to New York, and who worked his way up from the bottom. When asked if he would change anything in his life, he replied: ‘I wouldn’t want to change my life of struggle’, for without struggling, there would have been less chance of his ultimate success.

This was a man whose image fitted the philosophical currents shaping China’s New Culture. This last idea of ‘struggle’ has overtones of the Social Darwinism which had become so prevalent in the preceding decades in China. Other May Fourth themes emerge in these writings. Zou notes that journalists found it hard to get Edison to tell his life story, ‘because his whole spirit is focused on “now,” and he simply hasn’t time to spend efforts on the past’. Edison was cast as a true hero of the New Culture, which gave little reverence to history.

The altruistic elements of the New Culture are also here, reflected in the reporting of Edison’s observation that ‘money was not the primary goal of carrying out an enterprise’. In fact, this was not such a ‘new’ element, since it reflected in part the morality derived from Confucian embarrassment about profit as an end in itself. Merchants and commercial culture had generally not received much official praise or support in the past centuries, with a few exceptions such as the Yuan dynasty (1179–1268) which was established by Mongols rather than ethnic Chinese. Indeed, the philosophy of Mencius, one of the most influential of the early Confucians, starts with a king asking Mencius, ‘How can your advice profit my kingdom?’ to which the philosopher replies: ‘Why must your majesty speak of profit?’ This remained, and has remained, one of the greatest problems of congruence between western modernity and Confucianism in its premodern form. The industrialized, capitalist growth that underpins the modern idea of the progressive society is dependent on economic expansion and therefore profit, even if it does not always praise it explicitly. It has therefore been a continuing challenge to find a way to adapt the Confucian world-view, which starts by condemning profit as small-minded, egotistical, and petty, and making it explicitly compatible with the reality of a globalized world that is underpinned by capitalism. (The ‘Asian values’ debates of the 1990s, when Chinese
and other Asian leaders attempted to define their own economic growth as somehow being a Confucian enterprise, were ingenious, if contorted attempts to square this circle.) In the 1920s, the solution for the most radical May Fourth thinkers was to declare that Confucian thought was outmoded anyway and that westernized modernity was therefore the only way forward for China. But for Zou Taofen, who wanted to preserve aspects of Confucianism while embracing the more tempting aspects of modernity, other, more thoughtful solutions had to be found. And in this case, Thomas Edison’s personal wealth gained through his inventions was downplayed in favour of his argument that an invention’s value to humankind was the true indicator of its worth.

If the tales Zou told bear a striking resemblance to late Victorian self-help stories, or the archetypal Horatio Alger stories of young men making good, then that is no accident. Self-help tales owed a considerable debt to the Japanese ‘reform fiction’ of the late nineteenth century. In the rush for westernization and modernization after 1868, the Victorian work ethic, expressed through writers such as Samuel Smiles, with their advocacy of self-help, by which deserving young men could pull themselves up by their bootstraps, became extremely popular. These books were then widely translated and introduced into China. As in Japan, though, part of the reason for promoting this sort of story was the perceived need to overcome the Confucian scorn toward the merchant classes. While China had had a commercial revolution as early as the Song dynasty (960–1276), the reaction of Lu Xun’s mother to his decision not to follow the path of traditional official life shows that attachment to the old ideas of what was a respectable profession still held strong.

**Saving the Nation, Making a Profit**

Zou was a successful entrepreneur in his chosen field of publishing. For the most part, though, he did not portray himself as a role model for others. One of his friends and star columnists did, however. During the May Fourth era, Du Zhongyuan turned his nationalistic instincts toward setting up his own business as a means of ‘saving the
nation’. The story of one man was used to show how one small enterprise, in this case a porcelain factory in the remote region of Manchuria, could be used as a symbol to millions of readers of what the New Culture could achieve for the nation as a whole. In doing so, it aimed to suggest that there was no necessary conflict between making private profit and contributing to a collective goal of saving the country from the dangers that menaced it.

In a set of articles in Life, Du Zhongyuan used his own life story as an example, telling the readers how he had come to enter the porcelain business. It was an Edison-like tale of struggle against the odds, and of the challenge, as well as the burden, of imperialism. In 1915, Du remembered, there had been mass boycotts of Japanese goods because of the Twenty-One Demands (a set of notoriously harsh diplomatic and trade demands on China by the Japanese government), yet the anti-Japanese anger had dissipated because, in Du’s opinion, his ‘Chinese compatriots [were] like a tray of scattered sand, unable to keep up more than a five-minute enthusiasm’.

There was a linked commercial reason. Du’s arguments were part of a wider phenomenon, the National Products Movement, which encouraged consumers to buy Chinese goods over foreign ones. However, the unstated reality was that most Chinese bought imported goods, rather than those made in China, when they were given a choice: imported goods were generally cheaper and better-made, often because dumping had destroyed the indigenous Chinese market. The appeal to buy national goods was powerful at times of heightened popular feeling, as at the time of the Twenty-One Demands or the May Fourth demonstrations, but at other times, other more basic economic considerations controlled buyers’ impulses, and they tended to purchase cheaper foreign-made goods.

So Du set his mind to producing goods that would both be popular and help to restore China’s status: ‘I clung to the hope of promoting business enterprises so that I could save China.’ However, ‘any one individual can only make his own contribution to his utmost ability, so when wishing to use enterprise to save the country . . . I wanted to choose a business that would be what China needed, but would also exercise me to the utmost.’
It was in Japan, that menacing yet tempting source of Asian modernity, that his inspiration lay. Du had always had a fascination with porcelain. This product had become known in the west as ‘china’, so associated with its country of origin was it, but by the early twentieth century, control of the industry, at least in Manchuria, had slipped largely out of Chinese hands. ‘Porcelain was invented in China,’ said Du,

and in Tang and Song dynasty times, the Japanese repeatedly sent people to China to study it . . . but in the last hundred years, all sorts of countries have used the fierce advance of technology to discover all sorts of technological manufactures . . . Therefore, these Chinese national products . . . suffered a steep fall in the tables recording numbers sold, to the point where this country’s market was filled with foreign goods.41

How should he respond? Du recalled:

By chance one day I read in a porcelain industry journal an article about the Dahua porcelain company which the Japanese were building at Dalian, and I was very excited. The gist of this article was that the Dalian Mantetsu company had set up a central experimentation office and each year spent a tremendous sum of money to . . . invite specialized talents from all over [Japan] to research and do trials on all sorts of agricultural, mining, forestry, husbandry and fishery matters in Mongolia and Manchuria . . . If the specialized research had any results, then they would put together capital and set up a factory for manufacture.42

This venture capitalism had certainly paid off in the porcelain business, Du reflected. The Japanese had investigated which sticky clay soils were best for raw materials, which of the places where the soil was abundant were well-linked to transport facilities, and how the factory and kilns would be set up. ‘Finally, they put together the capital to put the whole plan into practice, step by step.’

‘When I read this essay,’ Du continued, ‘I thought that this company . . . with its encouragement and coaching of all sorts of enterprises, was the opposite of China’s sloppy and confused way of letting the days pass, letting our precious resources be utterly plundered. This made me sigh very deeply.’43 Japanese porcelain, he went on,
had achieved a reputation as ‘cheap but high quality’. How could
China compete? Once again, it was Japan that gave Du the chance to
move ahead. He was one of the students chosen by the Fengtian
provincial government in 1916 to study technology in Japan:

When we got to Japan, the thing I noticed most was that it was impossible to
find in their country a single piece of unused waste land, or a bit of
unnavigable waterway, or an uneducated or unskilled person, and every-
where, I noticed the level of development of industry and commerce. I
considered that we should certainly feel hatred for the Japanese invasion of
China, but we should absolutely take their creative and hardworking spirit
as a model.44

The next few years saw Du immersed in study in the ceramic
technology department of the Tokyo Industrial College. In 1923, he
came home, and immediately had to start looking for capital to help
him set up his dream of a porcelain factory. Yet his aspirations did not
please everyone he met:

The feeling in the past in China was that if a foreign student came home
from abroad, no matter what he’d studied, his many relatives and friends
always hoped that he’d become an official! At the very least, they’d hope
you’d become head of some agency, and when I returned home at that time,
there were people hoping this of me, constantly asking straight out, quite
rudely. I had made up my mind, and just smiled at them. But I de-
finitely had difficulties.45

Lu Xun, of course, had had his mother in tears when he aban-
donned the path to officialdom in favour of western studies in the late
Qing; even by the early Republic, that mentality had not been fully
transformed. Du found that his quest for venture capital was frustrat-
ing, with few people willing to back his idea. Nor, he pointed out, did
the provincial government do much to follow up on the skills that
they had paid for their scholarship students to learn in Japan. At the
time, the Northeast was run by Zhang Zuolin, a militarist leader
known for his enthusiasm for unending wars of conquest and lack of
interest in infrastructural development, so perhaps it is unsurprising
that Du found little official backing for his ideas.46 So Du decided
that rather than leaping straight to manufacturing porcelain, which would involve an investment of millions of yuan, he would start with a brickworks, which would need just several tens of thousands and which would produce items that could easily be sold. There was another reason for starting with bricks:

Ordinary people often believe that students [i.e. people who have been to modern colleges] only live the good life and never do any real graft. A brick business would be seen by people with ordinary levels of knowledge as a humbling and difficult thing to do. I wanted to prove that we students could also bear difficulties, and were willing to do a difficult business which ordinary people scorned.

The attitudes of May Fourth youth, in their contradictions, shine out in this statement. On the one hand, Du was eager to prove that the agenda of ‘national salvation’ was for real, and that like Edison and the other great inventors who studded Life’s pages, he was not only willing to work hard, but to do so for reasons which were for the greater glory of the nation or humankind, not merely for grubby profit. On the other, the openly stated distinction between ‘ordinary people’ with ‘ordinary levels of knowledge’, as opposed to the educated students, was a blatant statement of the division which education, even though it was now modern rather than classical, seemed to create even among Chinese who wanted to unite the nation. (It was this continued attitude of de haut en bas that angered Mao Zedong so much, leading him to demand a literature much more oriented towards the masses in his 1942 ‘Talks on Art and Literature’, and, towards the end of his life, stimulated his enthusiasm for the supposedly anti-hierarchical Cultural Revolution.) In the later 1930s, when he became a much better-known journalist and a more committed leftist, Du specialized in writing in a way that blurred, rather than emphasized, the difference between himself and the ‘ordinary people’.

Eventually, thanks to a loan from a friend who had been a fellow-student in Japan, Du was able to set up his first brickworks in the north part of Shenyang. His relatives and friends continued to bemoan his choice of career, and even the ‘ordinary people’ whom he
wanted to impress did not seem so much admiring as contemptuous of this educated fellow who was now messing around with dirt and clay. ‘I had never really dreamed of this when I was a student’, Du admitted. But he always stuck to the maxim, ‘If I don’t go down into hell, who else is going to go down into hell?’ The business slowly built up, however, and in turn attracted more and more funds, meaning that they could upgrade to high-quality German Hoffmann kilns. Eventually, ‘The Japanese couldn’t monopolize the new-style bricks and tiles which were needed for buildings all over Liaoning province and thus we snatched over 200,000 yuan from the hands of the Japanese.’

Yet the brickworks was not what Du had dreamed of. ‘The goal I had imagined,’ he reminded the reader, ‘was porcelain.’ But this was a more demanding task than making bricks and tiles: it needed more capital, more specialized materials such as clays, and also much more highly trained workers. To find his staff, Du ultimately had to poach workers who had been trained by the Japanese and were now employed in their factory at Dalian. The initial products of Du’s porcelain factory, he admitted, were not much good, but they improved rapidly, and by 1929, they produced over 3 million items, rising to 10 million by 1931, making a profit of over a million yuan.

Following the style of his editor, Zou Taofen, Du ended his account with a moral, a very Confucian conclusion to his tale and one that prevented it from looking like mere self-aggrandizement:

Although I’ve struggled for eight years, and am still engaged in the struggle, any success I have had, however small, has been the result of praise from society and help from all quarters… This is an extremely good opportunity to develop National Products, and I am willing to work with like-minded people to improve China’s porcelain industry, to struggle strongly in competition with foreigners, and to lessen the strength of foreigners in the porcelain industry in China.48

Du’s tale, like those Zou put forward weekly in Life, was a thoughtful alternative to what often appeared a self-indulgent May Fourth mentality which concentrated only on the self. But it is important to note its limitations as well. Du’s nationalistic tone was undoubtedly
sincere, but he did not offer clear, wide-ranging solutions to how businesses of the type he described might cope with the much wider issues that China faced at the time, including widespread rural poverty and seemingly endless civil conflict. In addition, the vision of entrepreneurship that Du put forward is implicitly a male one, with no suggestion that the economic energies of the ‘new woman’ might also be harnessed for the nation. In contrast, this was not an omission that would plague his successors in the 1980s.

End of an Era?

When did the May Fourth era, the world of possibility opened up by the New Culture, end? There is a good case for various end-points: for instance, the May Thirtieth anti-imperialist uprisings of 1925, because these marked the rise of the Nationalists and the Communists in their united front; or else the establishment of the Nationalist government under Chiang Kaishek at Nanjing in 1928. A useful way to think about it, however, is not in terms of a specific date, but of a time when the atmosphere changed significantly. As the 1920s moved into the 1930s, the values and lifestyles of experimentation, internationalism, and reassessment of the past, infused by an atmosphere and language of possibility and progress, slowly faded.

Why did the change come, and how would it have been noticed? The May Fourth era cannot be conveniently divided in the way that a parallel era such as the Weimar Republic in Germany can: the German empire ended sharply, if not neatly, in 1919, and the Nazi era which began in 1933 marked an equally obvious break with the Weimar past. A better comparison here is the western experience of ‘the Sixties’, which does not refer to the period 1960–9, but rather to a time and place not easily captured by precise dates. Even at the end of the ‘long Sixties’, when the oil shock of 1973 put paid to the prosperity which had fuelled economic development since World War II, values and everyday experience did not change overnight in western society.

For the May Fourth generation in China, two major changes come to mind. First, in the 1910s and 1920s, the ever-present threat of
foreign imperialism had been tempered, however grudgingly, by the internationalist spirit of the times, marked by Woodrow Wilson's idealism and the establishment of the League of Nations. In the 1930s, this changed: the threat of invasion from Japan became a constant, repeated theme for Zou Taofen, Du Zhongyuan, and writers such as Lao She and even the populist Zhang Henshui. Then, the Chinese economy, which had been showing reasonable signs of growth up to the early 1930s, became subject to the great world depression, and China was struck by mass urban unemployment and rural agricultural crisis.49

In retrospect, the year in which the change occurred may well have been 1931. The most notorious incident in that year was the occupation of Manchuria, the northeastern provinces of China, by the Japanese Kwantung Army, which had had a semi-colonial presence there since 1905. Worried by the growing tide of Chinese nationalism, and with Japanese politics sliding away from democracy and crushed by the economic depression, the Japanese stepped up military adventurism in China. The year also saw turmoil within Chiang Kaishek's Nationalist Party, leading to his temporary resignation (he returned to power in early 1932). Meanwhile, the Yangtze River flooded, drowning millions and destroying harvests.

Yet none of these events changed China overnight. Peking University carried on educating students. Shanghai's lower middle class went on reading Zou Taofen and Du Zhongyuan's publications, although the two authors became increasingly vulnerable to Chiang Kaishek's censors. Women continued to find independent work, and entrepreneurs continued to build up businesses. The invasion of Manchuria was, at least for a while, considered a great blow to the national honour, and demonstrations filled the streets about it; but in the end, for people living in Shanghai and even in Beijing, Manchuria was a very long way off, and there were more immediate problems nearer home to deal with.50 A much more obvious change would come in 1937, with the outbreak of full-scale war with Japan. Both Beijing and Shanghai would be occupied within months, leading to a mass exodus by the May Fourth generation to exile in the remote inland cities of Chongqing, Kunming, or Yan’an.
The people who lived through this era saw China in a period of change, yet there were many directions in which that change could have led. Du Zhongyuan’s story is a May Fourth one just as much as Lu Xun’s. A faith in science and technology, linked with ideas of national salvation and reform, seemed to many to provide a way forward out of China’s crisis. The era was also obsessed with the purifying qualities of difficulty and struggle. The retrospective glow which the CCP has cast on collective values simultaneously downgraded the experiences of entrepreneurs and capitalists in general as exploitative and in league with the imperialist powers, until the 1980s, when they were praised once again during Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms. Yet the CCP’s criticisms of alternative paths to their own were surely unfair: the option exemplified by Du in the 1920s was not sufficient to answer all the vast problems in China, but that did not make it valueless either. The young woman who wrote to Zou Taofen to chide the lascivious teacher mentioned that the search for love should be treated as an ‘experiment’. The nature of the era’s cultural change was that it carried out different ‘experiments in happiness’, not just in personal relationships but in all aspects of life, while the opportunity was there to do so. As politics changed in the 1930s, and the door that had brought the outside world to China began to close, so the opportunities to experiment became fewer and fewer.
Although the May Fourth Movement broke out in May 1919, its original causes emerged before May Fourth itself, as a result of China’s social situation and the First World War. In June 1916, [president of the Republic] Yuan Shikai, who had spent 83 days as [self-declared] emperor, died. After Yuan died, all sorts of people who had fled the country because they opposed Yuan returned home, and the worlds of Chinese politics, thought and education, which had been moribund, livened up from then on.1

Xu Deheng’s retrospective musing on the origins of May Fourth and the New Culture Movement was not quite accurate in detail: several important events in its development, including the foundation of New Youth, the journal edited by Chen Duxiu, had happened before Yuan Shikai’s death. But on the big picture, he was quite correct. May Fourth, as an era, was not just about 4 May 1919, and politics and thought certainly ‘livened up’ during it. The questions people asked were about politics in the widest sense. ‘China’s social situation’ included poverty, famine, and internal warfare. The legacy of ‘the First World War’ included the question of how China would deal with imperialism, and reflected the reality that China could not shut itself off from the rest of the world. Xu had been one of the original participants in the May Fourth demonstrations, and had been arrested and held for a few days after the arson attack on minister Cao Rulin’s house. His summary of the causes of that day’s events reflects these new realities, which were understood by large numbers of Chinese. The students who had demonstrated were among the most prominent of those who shared this realization, but lower
middle-class shopkeepers who lived in cities full of advertisements for the fruits of international capitalism (American movies, Swedish matches) and ordinary labourers who had been sent to the Western Front in France, or who had relatives who had been and returned, also started to think of themselves as part of a global society, and their understanding of politics changed accordingly. This chapter looks at the new ways in which thinkers analysed and presented the new political realities. It is a story that is sometimes complex, but that complexity reflects the rich and exciting range of possibilities that were, paradoxically, nurtured by the very instability of China’s government at the time. Among the questions that arose were: How far can the old Confucian norms be abandoned or adapted? What can we take from western political thought, and what should we oppose? Are the experiences of other non-western societies relevant for us? And for some, though not all: Are Marxism and the Soviet Union useful examples for China to follow?

For a long time, the story of Chinese politics in the twentieth century has generally been regarded as equivalent to the story of the rise of the Communist Party to power. Yet it is important to remember that the Communist story is remarkable partly because its beginnings in the 1910s and 1920s were so unpromising, and because it won out against what was, for a time at least, a wide range of political options. The May Fourth Movement has become a touchstone for the Chinese Communist Party. The New Culture era was the birthplace of Chinese nationalism and communism, and in the Party’s view, its logical result was the communist revolution, a quarter of a century later. The need to secure official memory of May Fourth meant that subversive, alternative interpretations (such as the 1989 Tian’anmen demonstrations) were particularly worrying to the Party. Even those who are not necessarily sympathetic to the CCP sometimes assume that there was some sort of inevitability about the political path that China took between 1911 and 1949, with the Republican period as an anomalous period of darkness ended by ‘liberation’, a phrase still commonly used to refer to the Communist revolution of 1949.

This is a pity, for several reasons. The first reason is that this
interpretation suggests a seemingly logical conclusion to China’s twentieth-century history, whereas the disillusionment in present-day China with much of Mao’s record suggests that the Chinese experience from 1949 to 1976 was a detour in China’s historical path: an epoch-making detour, but a detour nonetheless. The second reason is that the communist-dominated version of Chinese history obscures the rich variety of political alternatives which the May Fourth era brought forward. There were many different ideas put forward to ‘save the nation’. Communism was the thread of thought which would ultimately win out, but in the early twentieth century, there were Chinese interested in anarchism, guild socialism (a bottom-up form of socialism that argued, unlike Marxism, that class struggle was unnecessary), feminism, fascism, and liberalism, to name but a few.2

The period is also important because it forced an argument about how China should deal with its Confucian past. Again, the retrospective version of the story is that the May Fourth period ‘enlightened’ the Chinese people into rejecting the oppressive, patriarchal web of Confucian culture wholesale, freeing them to embrace western political thought and the CCP in particular. Yet it is clear only the most radical of the May Fourth generation advocated complete and utter rejection of Confucianism, and that for many others, it was important to salvage or adapt China’s past while coping with the new reality of the present.

Another great theme of modern Chinese history, the rise of nationalism, has sometimes been obscured under the dominant Communist narrative. Often, the rise of Communism and nationalist ideas fuelled by anti-imperialism in general and the coming war against Japan from the 1930s have been treated as aspects of the same phenomenon. Yet it is misleading and unfair to characterize nationalism as simply a second fiddle to the all-important rise of Communism. In particular, the Nationalist (Kuomintang) government of Chiang Kaishek (1929–49) gets short shrift in histories that take the rise of Communism as the most important story of mid-twentieth-century China. The Nationalists have been dismissed as corrupt, brutal, and incompetent. All these epithets were true, in many instances. How-

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ever, the Nationalists were also a genuinely ideological party with a patriotic agenda, and Chiang Kaishek was throughout his life every bit as strong an anti-imperialist as Mao Zedong. Most of the intellectual assumptions of the May Fourth generation were shared by Communists, Nationalists, and those of other or no party affiliation: these included patriotism, Social Darwinism, and a fixation on ‘modernizing’ China, however that term was defined. On the issue of class divisions and class warfare, of course, the CCP had their own distinctive position, but this was not, at the time, as all-encompassing a difference as it later became. And in the early years of the fledgling CCP, 1923–7, the two parties were locked in a united front that meant it was sometimes hard to distinguish between their policies.

The party to ‘win’ in the initial aftermath of May Fourth was not the Communist Party, but that of the Nationalists, who set up their government in Nanjing in 1928. Just as 1960s America was the period of Nixon’s victory and the Goldwater boom as much as it was the time of hippies and anti-Vietnam demonstrations, so May Fourth cannot simply be interpreted as a time when ‘progressive’ forces won out over ‘conservatives’, in the arena of thought, let alone governance.3

In addition, the attention usually given to the two big political parties of the era, the Nationalists and the Communists, can be misleading when we consider the way in which politics became popularized during this period. Ordinary Chinese did not, for the most part, identify with political parties in the way that mass populations did in the west over the decades of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the US, Andrew Jackson’s presidency had popularized politics in the mid-nineteenth century; in Britain, the Conservative Party under Disraeli had used the Primrose League to increase participation in the Victorian era as the franchise expanded; and in Germany in the same era, the new Social Democratic Party had brought political participation to the working classes. This type of mass identification with parties was far less evident in China. Even though parliaments and assemblies existed in China during the Republic, they rarely expressed popular will directed through political parties, as did happen to a significant
degree in Japan, or even India after Gandhi promoted the idea of a mass-membership Congress Party. Yet this was also a period when a large proportion of the population did become politically aware. Some aspects of that awareness were in fact directed through party political structures. Notably, industrial labour movements in Shanghai and Guangzhou in the 1920s came under significant Communist influence. Nonetheless, for most of the 1920s, the changing governments in Beijing had little to do with the political aspirations or ideologies of either the parties or the wider population, and even when Chiang Kaishek established his National government at Nanjing in 1928, having first purged his former Communist allies, his regime realized that their victory had been primarily military, and that they would have to inculcate their political agenda from the top down, rather than relying on a non-existent swell of popular support.

But if most people did not identify with party politics, how can one say that a significant proportion of the population became politically informed? In the cities, the press, that great engine of the New Culture in all its forms, was a powerful source of political information. For instance, as noted in Chapter 2, Zou Taofen’s Life magazine took off from small beginnings in 1925 to become the best-selling journal in China, with perhaps 1.5 million readers by the 1930s. Zou himself started off as a liberal influenced by the ideas of the American philosopher John Dewey, although he would later become a Marxist. His political agenda can easily be discerned from looking at the type of articles he published in Life. The inspirational articles about personal entrepreneurialism mentioned above reflect the liberal individualism which inspired him, and which had been influenced by the self-improvement craze of late nineteenth-century Japan. Zou’s entrepreneurialism, like that of his friend Du Zhongyuan, was expressed in terms of the values of May Fourth: science, modernization, and nationalism.

To many Chinese, their country, which just a few decades before had been one of the world’s great land empires, now seemed to have split into fragments, ruled by avaricious militarists and under attack from foreign invaders. Yet from this seeming chaos would come the
During the May Fourth era, Chinese thinkers were enormously enthusiastic about intellectual influences from the outside world. Foreign writers such as Shaw, the British philosopher Bertrand Russell, and the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore gave lectures to large audiences.
The single adjective most associated with the May Fourth Movement is ‘iconoclastic’. The writing and actions of the time are marked by an unwillingness to accept the norms and assumptions of the Confucian culture, which was deemed to have failed China. One such norm was the traditional veneration of old age and wisdom in Chinese culture, which was of course challenged by the very title of the journal that Chen Duxiu founded in 1915, New Youth. In one of the first articles he published in it, ‘Call to Youth’, Chen declared: ‘The function of youth in society is the same as that of a fresh and vital cell in a human body.’6 Linked to this new enthusiasm for youth was the idea of ‘newness’. Since the late Qing, the word ‘new’ (xin) had been used to describe the ‘new life’, ‘new citizen’, and ‘new civilization’ that a modern China was to produce. The western consciousness of a linear flow of time had also begun to make a significant impact on Chinese society. This encouraged many thinkers, including Chen Duxiu, to propose that China had entered a ‘new epoch’, a very different and profound time which ought to be perceived as significantly different from the ‘old’ society.7

The stress on youth was linked with a new interest in a modern projection of the self, which took pride in individual and autonomous identity. It is notable that many of the writings, both fiction and fact, that appear in this book are first-person accounts of experiences and feelings. To produce this sort of account, putting the individual self firmly in the foreground, rather than modestly claiming anonymity or a reluctance to put oneself forward, was also a significant cultural...
change, and out of keeping with the Confucian norms of how one should talk about oneself in a public forum.8

The iconoclastic urge was also notable in the May Fourth generation’s rejection of the patriarchal treatment of Chinese women. In 1918, Lu Xun published an essay in New Youth entitled ‘My Views on Chastity’, which condemned the traditional insistence that women remain chaste, whereas men were not required to be so: ‘These women are to be pitied. Trapped for no good reason by tradition and numbers, they are sacrificed to no good purpose . . . We must do away with all the stupidity and tyranny that create and relish the sufferings of others.’9 ‘Moderation’ was another Confucian virtue which the May Fourth radicals rejected. Too often, Lu Xun argued, ‘moderation’ was merely a codeword for tolerance of abuse and turning a blind eye to corruption. Mao Zedong wrote an essay in 1917 which also took issue with the Confucian ideal of sage, calm, and moderate action, and instead demanded that the Chinese people learn ‘to charge on horseback amid the clash of arms and to be ever victorious; to shake the mountains by one’s cries’.10 One can see Mao’s enthusiasm for revolution in his earliest utterances.

The most famous example of the May Fourth radicals’ desire to root out all aspects of China’s Confucian culture is Lu Xun’s short story ‘Diary of a Madman’ (1918), which is included in his collection Call to Arms [Naban]. It is largely on these stories that his reputation as China’s finest modern fiction writer rests, and there is no doubt about their literary quality. However, this story’s power derives from its uncompromising anger with Confucianism. The unnamed narrator of the story slips into madness, and as he does so, becomes convinced that his fellow-Chinese are all cannibals. ‘It has only just dawned on me,’ he declares, ‘that all these years I have been living in a place where for four thousand years human flesh has been eaten.’ ‘They eat human beings,’ he worries, ‘so they may eat me.’ He tries to look up the history of cannibalism in a book of Chinese history, but all he finds in the book are the two phrases ‘Confucian virtue and morality’ and ‘eat people’. Finally convinced that ‘I may have eaten several pieces of my sister’s flesh unwittingly’, he begs in the last lines of the story: ‘Perhaps there are still children who haven’t eaten men?’

Goodbye Confucius

Save the children...’11 In Chinese history, cannibalism has been one of the most powerful images of a society whose values have lost all morality, and for Lu Xun to assault the entire basis of Chinese governance and society using this metaphor was a powerful indictment indeed.

The uncompromising nature of Lu Xun’s abhorrence of the past, along with that of figures such as Chen Duxiu and Mao Zedong, stemmed from their own experience of the crisis which China faced in the early twentieth century. Yet there is a disturbingly extreme tone to their writings as well. The message not to tolerate ‘moderation’ could be seen as a warning against compromise with evil, but could also encourage a single-minded reluctance to grant tolerance to alternative views. The shrill denunciations of Confucian culture may have been partly fuelled by the real sense of self-doubt and, at times, self-loathing that marked the May Fourth generation. One of the most famous short story collections of the era is Yu Dafu’s ‘Sinking’, whose title refers to a psychological feeling of uncertainty, ‘the clash between soul and flesh’.12 Or there was Sophie, the anti-heroine of Ding Ling’s short story: ‘I pray[ed] that other women wouldn’t be like me... falling into a vast misery from which I'll never be able to extricate myself.’13 This ungroundedness seemed to infect the whole May Fourth generation. It seems that those who shouted loudest were perhaps those most unsure of where they stood.

**Goodbye Confucius?**

Yet there were other ways to deal with the feeling of having lost one’s bearings. There was a great deal of thinking not just about culture from abroad, but also about China’s own political and philosophical traditions. Zou Taofen, for instance, came to startlingly different conclusions from Lu Xun, arguing that Confucianism could be adapted and changed to fit the requirements of the modern world.

One of the victories, retrospectively, of the most radical part of the May Fourth Movement, the iconoclastic anti-Confucians, was that they managed to portray China after 1915 as a place where most sensible people quickly saw the light of the New Culture and threw...
off the shackles of the old thinking. And it is genuinely remarkable how quickly a world-view that had shaped not only the huge Chinese empire but much of the surrounding region for more than two millennia withered so swiftly under the impact of modernity. Modernity was a powerful influence in China, of course, but so it was also in India, the Middle East, Japan, Korea, and Southeast Asia. These societies all produced indigenous, hybrid interpretations of what ‘modernity’ meant that pushed aside artificial distinctions between what was ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’. Gandhi’s thought or the development of politicized Islamism showed ways in which modern nationalist ideologies could incorporate world-views not derived from western thought. Japan and Korea incorporated Buddhism, Shinto, and also Confucianism into a modernized ideology which contributed to those states’ development of nationalism. Chinese politics did not do so, not because it was impossible to find a modernized Confucianism, but because the two political parties who would go on to fight for control of China’s destiny in the century, although bitterly divided, shared one crucial characteristic: both the Nationalists and the Communists were secular and drew on western political models in their intellectual derivations and assumptions (even though the Nationalists later made attempts, such as the New Life Movement of the 1930s, to start recycling Confucian language). Secularism did not necessarily mean being anti-religious — although the Communists were hostile to religion per se, the New Life Movement did approve of and authorize recognized religions within China, differentiating them from cults and superstition — but it did make a point of separating the spiritual world from the material and political sphere.

So Confucianism undoubtedly came under assault and buckled under the impact of modernity in China. But the extent of its demise, as well as the speed with which that demise happened, has been exaggerated. In the form in which it existed before the great crises of the nineteenth century, the broad tenets of the Confucian worldview were fundamentally challenged by foreign invasion. These tenets include a belief in spiritual and cosmic harmony, in which the Chinese Emperor played a pivotal role. The Confucian world-view believed in stability as an absolute overriding good for the state, to be

maintained through *li*, the intricate and complex system of ritual behaviour which defined what it was to be human. The word ‘ritual’ is itself an unsatisfactory way to translate what was a far more all-encompassing system of understanding of both hierarchy and mutual obligation. China was assaulted in the nineteenth century by two thought-systems from the west which undermined these assumptions. Modernity, in its many incarnations (Social Darwinism, liberalism, imperialism, capitalism, socialism), made assumptions that were clearly at odds with Confucianism. The modern mindset was concerned with dynamic growth rather than orderly stasis. It made assumptions that were less hierarchical than those of Confucianism, but also lessened social obligations from one group or individual towards another. The other thought-system was Christianity, whose influence, particularly as filtered through the radicalsm of the Taiping movement, should not be underestimated. It was not just a religion, but also a dynamic, and non-hierarchical alternative to the Confucian world-view, though this time with a very strong ethic of mutual obligation, as well as a spiritual dimension. Like modernity, this put it in powerful tension with Confucianism. It is no surprise that many of the social reformers and revolutionaries of the early twentieth century, such as Sun Yatsen and the agricultural reformer James Yen, were either Christians or at least given a missionary education.

Anti-Confucianism was, in the twentieth century, really about the need to break down the complex network of social relations that was encompassed in the concept of *li*. This was what made the most radical language of the New Culture seem so exhilarating to many, and echoes of this desire to break down *li* can be seen as late as the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s. Anti-Confucians such as Lu Xun, Mao Zedong, or Hu Shi argued that Confucianism was a prison which forced hierarchies on the vulnerable, such as women and the poor. Yet to argue this, they resorted in part to caricature. Confucian thought-systems were shared by politicians and courtiers in power in the late nineteenth century who seemed unable to lift China out of its crisis. But immediate social and political problems in the Qing court were to blame for the most pressing causes of social breakdown. Furthermore, there were Confucian ways to reform, such as
the moral revival and encouragement of technology that the late Qing reformer Zeng Guofan offered. Hierarchical oppression without acknowledging any social obligations, which was what anti-Confucians accused the dominant system of practising, was not supposed to be the driving force of Confucianism, even if it seemed to be the practice of the Qing government at that particular historical moment.

But although the radical anti-Confucians, and particularly the CCP, became the dominant voices in the story of China’s twentieth century as it was later interpreted, their position was strongly contested at the time. The legacy and world-view of two millennia, although they were challenged, were far too long-standing simply to disappear overnight, however much Lu Xun or Chen Duxiu might want them to do so.

For Zou Taofen too, as we will see, Confucianism was a source of political thought to be adapted, not abandoned. There is a space to be found between the radical May Fourth argument that the twentieth century saw the death of Confucianism, which was finally found to be past its sell-by date, and the argument, still sometimes heard today, that China has remained a Confucian state and culture, that Chiang Kaishek and Mao were simply returning to the Dragon Throne, and that the hierarchies of premodern China are preserved largely intact. For Confucianism did not stay the same in the twentieth century, any more than something called ‘Christianity’ was the same system of beliefs and world-views in 1700 or 2000 that it was in 1100 or 500. The spiritual element of Confucianism, in terms of the balance between heaven and earth, has been a far less major element in its twentieth-century incarnation everywhere, including in Japan, Taiwan, Korea, and other societies where it has not been formally persecuted; and it was always a spiritually somewhat pragmatic system anyway, with Buddhism, Daoism, and folk religion often fulfilling needs for more mystical and irrational elements in society.

However, the framework of mutual obligation, ethical behaviour, ritual, stability as a good in its own right, and disdain for commerce and profit remains important in a belief-system that contrasts with the underlying assumptions of modernity. It was much of this
structure that the early Communists chose to throw off; hence the exhilaration of one of the early Communists, Cai Hesen, when he discovered Leninism not just as a system of control but as a justification of the very un-Confucian idea that one can do evil to bring about a greater good. This does not mean that one cannot find a way to justify, say, making a profit on sales in Confucian language, and Zou Taofen and Du Zhongyuan’s writings effectively do just this, but it has always been clear that Confucian thought must justify profit as part of a wider social good. In the same way, Zou’s admiration for Thomas Edison was expressed not in terms of his great personal fortune, but rather because he was ‘the world’s most useful old man’. This ethic is reflected in Zou Taofen’s comment that Edison’s first intention in developing movies was not to provide a frivolous leisure item, but instead something that could be used for educational purposes. This was a very Confucian justification, as was the background tale told of Edison bringing himself up from poverty through hard studying.

However, it is not possible simply to separate out and isolate the constituent parts of a system of thought, like a chromatogram separating out the dyes in ink. Confucianism, like Islamism, has inevitably been shaped by global modernity, because the twentieth century, for all societies that were not wholly isolated, was an era when modernity had an impact on all significant political and cultural movements, even when those movements rejected it. Some aspects of the premodern Confucian world-view did not survive the mid-nineteenth century. How, after all, could the belief that the person of the emperor was the fulcrum of a spiritual harmony between heaven and earth survive in a China where there was no emperor? Yet assumptions which are clearly Confucian in their origins survived well into the New Culture Movement and beyond.

Some of the applications of Confucian thought in the 1920s and 1930s were inadvertent or perhaps slightly ironic. For instance, the senior CCP leader Liu Shaoqi made use of Confucian thought in his book How to Be a Good Communist. Furthermore, as we will see later, in the early 1930s, the Nationalist government of Chiang Kaishek started advocating a return to Confucian values, urging that the state rather
than the emperor should be the object of loyalty. Chiang promoted the New Life Movement, initiated in 1934, which advocated a ‘secular and rational Confucianism’ which ‘constituted a uniquely Chinese “spirit” compatible with modernity and shared by all Chinese’. The movement was not ultimately successful in its attempts to mobilize China, as its formal prescriptions, including not spitting in the street and queuing up in an orderly fashion, came over as trivial in comparison with the much larger issues of national coherence which dogged twentieth-century China. But the idea behind it, that ‘personal cultivation’ (xiushen) by the individual would contribute to a healthy society and country owed a great deal to Confucian thinking, as well as being influenced by western ideas of Social Darwinism. Nor did the New Life Movement come out of thin air. Throughout the 1920s, various thinkers had argued that it was possible to provide an adaptation of Confucian values which would be compatible with a secular (but not anti-religious) Chinese modernity. In 1927, before Chiang Kaishek had even come to power, Zou Taofen had put forward an argument that Confucian values could be reinterpreted to give China prestige in the new internationalized world:

The most important part of China’s innate morality is zhongxiao, xinyi, ren'ai and heping [loyalty and filiality, trust and righteousness, benevolent love, peace and stability]. Some people have misunderstood, and considered that whereas in the monarchical era, there was loyalty, now in the republican era there is no loyalty. But why isn’t loyalty to the country [guo] counted as loyalty? In fact, with regard to these several good moralities, we should not only preserve them, but also develop and expand them, and solidify our national base. Aside from our innate morality, there is also our innate wisdom [zhishi]. We ought to recover this, and honestly and sincerely cultivate [xiushen] principles of ordering the family and regulating the country. This is the most precious item of the innate wisdom of China . . . If foreigners see that China cannot govern the country, then they will come and exercise joint control over it [gongguan].

In part, Zou went on to argue, it was individual behaviour such as spitting on the ground and not cleaning one’s teeth properly that created a moral deficit which prevented the country as a whole from taking its rightful place in international society. These connections
between the individual and the country at large would underpin the New Life Movement just a few years later, and would even make their way into the People’s Republic (see Chapter 8).

This sort of attempt to popularize modernized Confucianism was attacked by some May Fourth thinkers, who claimed that Chiang Kaishek wanted to take China back to its oppressive, hierarchical past. Hu Shi, although he was never enticed by Marxism as his contemporaries Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao were, nonetheless felt obliged to speak out in 1933 during a series of public lectures in the United States against Chiang’s seeming return to Confucianism, and against those who advocated a return to ‘traditional culture’. Hu declared that this was a ‘most fashionable expression of a reactionary mood prevalent today’.

Yet the opponents of this revived Confucianism were to some extent creating a monster that did not exist. Even though he used Confucian language, Chiang’s policy was still an essentially secular project based on an assumption that industrial modernization and nationalism were the bases for the development of China. Chiang had not turned himself into an emperor or god to be worshipped. The New Life Movement did not contain an integrated religious dimension, although it praised Taoism and Buddhism as aspects of China’s ancient culture, and was tolerant of worship as long as it did not take extravagant or superstitious forms. The Movement and Chiang’s regime could be justifiably attacked for being dictatorial and unimaginative in the face of China’s political crisis. But it did not challenge the drive to secular modernity. It was, rather, an attempt to create it.

To see how far Chiang might have gone in creating a non-secular political system, one needed only to look at what was happening at the same time in Japan. In that country, the political usage of religious practice within a modern state showed how far Confucianism could have been pushed. The Kyoto School is probably the most famous group of political thinkers in early twentieth-century Japan. It became notorious for the role it had in justifying Japan’s increasing militarization and aggression against its neighbours in the 1930s, as many of its thinkers provided a religious and philosophical justification for Japan’s aggression in East Asia, casting it in terms of a sacred
mission to liberate Japan and its neighbours from corrupting western influence. One of the most notable thinkers linked with the Kyoto School, the philosopher Nishida Kitarô, was heavily influenced by western thinkers such as Hegel, but was also strongly committed to Zen Buddhism, as well as the Confucian norms that had influenced premodern Japan after their introduction from China. In Nishida, and in many other Japanese thinkers of this period, there was an active mystical and proudly irrational dimension which was far less evident in China. Chiang Kaishek was attacked by radical and progressive Chinese thinkers in the 1930s for trying to take China back to what they saw as the past. Ironically, Japanese politicians attacked him at the same time for being too similar in his secular nationalism to groups such as the Communists. In terms of Chiang's political grounding and the meaning he ascribed to Confucianism, the Japanese may have been more accurate in their accusations.

Confucianism, then, did not simply disappear, however much its iconoclastic opponents might have wished it to do so. Yet it is clear that terms such as ‘nationalism’, ‘science’, and ‘democracy’ became widespread in May Fourth China. Next, we must examine how and why they did so.

China’s Road to Nationalism

The major strand of modern thought that took form in China in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was nationalism. As the assumptions of modernity began to replace Confucian thinking about how the state should be organized, Chinese thinkers recognized that the ‘nation’ had been an important political concept in the west, and considered its possibilities carefully.

What was nationalism in China, and why did it take the form that it did? Nationalism in China was an ideological creation that emerged largely in reaction to the perceived inadequacies of a political identity that was based on Confucianism. As we have seen, not all Chinese thinkers believed that Confucianism needed to be wholly abandoned. But even its supporters saw that it would have to be adapted to take account of the modern world which had impacted on
China so violently. The assumptions of the Confucian world-view in the premodern era – stasis, the need for order, hierarchy, ritual, mutual obligation, the downplaying of the individual self – came into conflict with the assumptions of nationalism as developed in the west in the context of capitalist, imperialist modernity – ideas of progress, rationality, scientific categorization, hostility to hierarchy, and the downplaying of premodern ideas of mutual obligation in favour of individualism, which held that the modern self was a positive and productive idea. Yet, despite the alien nature of the concept, Chinese thinkers quickly saw that the nation-state had become the dominant political form in global politics, and that they would have to think through its implications for their own country. A ‘nation’, a political form based on the idea of equal citizenship, was a foreign concept, yet it quickly became clear that it was a powerful and potentially useful one. These thinkers also understood that nation-states were a product of western modernity, and that modernity had more than one form. Therefore, the further question emerged: not just how to make China modern, but what type of modern China should they aim for?

A wide variety of proposals for nation-building was put forward by thinkers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They were a relatively small elite who had access to books and ideas from the west and Japan, yet they sought to create a model for the nation which would enable them to mobilize all of China’s vast population. They differed widely in their proposals for how to do this. For some, influenced by Victorian pseudo-biology, a supposedly objective definition of the Chinese ‘race’ became an essential defining characteristic to decide who could be members of a Chinese nation. This type of racial nationalism became much sharper in the very late Qing when the main target of the revolutionaries was the ethnically separate Manchus who ruled the dynasty. For others, creating equal citizens, as opposed to subjects of the emperor, was the defining characteristic of a nation, and writers such as the late Qing polymath Liang Qichao developed and popularized ideas of the ‘New Citizen’, a Chinese who would be committed to this new way of thinking about being identified as Chinese.21
After the 1911 revolution, though, there was a change in emphasis. Anti-Manchu racial nationalism lost its potency after the Qing dynasty had ended, and internal conflict and imperialist attack from outside seemed to be more pressing concerns for the new state. Consequently, certain models of nationhood tended to dominate in the minds of most of the thinkers who became prominent during this period, which we now associate with the May Fourth Movement. For instance, nationalism of this era tends to share a centralized, as opposed to federal, vision of China, an understandable development at a time when it appeared that China might be carved up by the various great powers. In addition, there is an overwhelming emphasis on mass political participation and scientific and technical rationality as ways to achieve ‘national salvation’ (jiuguo), that is, to unite China and make it strong and prosperous. These two concerns are summed up in Chen Duxiu’s formulation that what China needed was ‘Mr Science’ and ‘Mr Democracy’. ‘Science and democracy’ have been associated with the May Fourth period ever since, and are promoted today by many Chinese reformers who argue that they are still valid as a solution to the country’s problems. These terms have become so natural in China that they are sometimes uttered without thought. However, their wide adoption in the May Fourth era suggests that reformers made an active choice to pursue a version of nationalism which was dominated by a vision of modernity primarily derived from Enlightenment assumptions about ‘science’. This was something that, in contrast, their neighbours in Japan did not so unequivocally embrace. Why was this choice attractive to the May Fourth generation of Chinese?

To answer this, it is necessary to turn briefly to the source of rhetoric on ‘science’ as a panacea, the European Enlightenment. The Enlightenment, emerging in the seventeenth century and reaching its zenith in the eighteenth, ‘led to the conviction that reason could uncover the rules that underlay the apparent chaos of both the human and the material world’. Its advocates were seized with the conviction that ‘rationality’ and a scientific mindset were sufficient to unlock the ordering of the world and its societies, and this worldview had a profound effect on the rise of scientific modernity in
western society. This idea of science as a sort of analytical searchlight was highly influential in shaping not only ideas about the natural world, but also the analysis of socially constructed ideas such as nations, races, and classes. In Europe, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw reactions against this sometimes uncritical confidence in scientific rationality. Romanticism, in particular, was a reaction to what its followers saw as the dry, passionless mastery of reason, and instead embraced passion, irrationality, the supernatural, and even ideas of madness and death. Romantics praised the cult of the hero, an individual, often self-obsessed, who nonetheless achieves great things through the force of his own will.

The ideology of nationalism, like many other ideologies, was created in the west as part of the era of modernity. When examining the history of China and Japan, one of the most important developments that has been analysed is the two countries’ trajectory from ‘tradition’ to ‘modernity’, and the part that the development of nationalism played in that move: how did these two neighbours progress from the old world to the new, and why did Japan seem to have done so more successfully than China? This is still a valid question, even though the division between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ has been questioned as it has become clear that aspects of the past remain embedded in the present, and the two concepts cannot be so easily separated. However, relatively little attention has been paid to the way in which China’s and Japan’s dominant political thinkers chose different types of modernity to cope with the world into which the western gunboats had thrust them. For in the May Fourth era, there was more than one version of modernity available in the global market of ideas.

First, the world contained two major types of ‘Enlightenment modernity’. Liberal democracy and Communism both laid claim to ideas of secularism and rationality (Communism adopting an aggressively anti-religious stance). Both also advocated ‘democracy’, although their definitions of the term were very different indeed, and both approved of the scientific world-view (Communism in particular, as it derived its strength from the supposedly ‘scientific’ basis of Marxism). Then there was a third type of modernity, this time one
that claimed to reject Enlightenment assumptions but shared many of them in practice. Nazism and Italian fascism claimed to reject ‘bourgeois’ values such as democracy, capitalism, and ideas of secular, rational progress. Nonetheless, they can be meaningfully termed ideologies of modernity, because they so explicitly used Enlightenment modernity as a convenient foil against which to oppose themselves and employed the tools of modern state-building, such as creating political status based on mass citizenship (although this was denied to groups judged enemies of the ‘nation’). Furthermore, states such as Nazi Germany whose rhetoric rejected industrial capitalism and claimed to yearn after an agrarian past when their countries were peopled by a pure-blooded racial stock, in fact took full advantage of the same techniques and industries as states whose rhetoric embraced the scientific world-view. The fascist and ultranationalist states, supposed enemies of modernity, nonetheless delighted in scientific and technological progress (such as Autobahn roads and Messerschmitt aircraft in Germany), as well as pseudo-scientific ideas of ‘race’. This type of ‘anti-modern modernity’ needs to be distinguished from thought-systems such as pre-twentieth-century Confucianism. That type of Confucianism was not anti-modern, or a reaction against modernity. It was just non-modern: it was based on a completely different set of assumptions.

Chinese and Japanese thinkers used different ingredients from these various recipes for modernity. There were few Chinese fascists, for instance. They did exist, and in the 1930s Chiang Kaishek even explored some of the mobilization techniques of the European fascist states, whose ability to unite their nations he had admired. But the mainstream rhetoric from most prominent Chinese nationalists was taken from Enlightenment modernity, and used the language of science, technological progress, and democratic politics. Mao Zedong and Chiang Kaishek had rather different ideas about what those concepts meant, so much so that they ended up at war with each other for two decades, but they started from the same premise that China needed to be ‘modern’. In contrast, Japanese nationalism was always more mystical and romanticist, which led it in the more avowedly anti-western direction that it took in the 1930s. For many thinkers in
Japan, science and democracy might have been useful as tools of development, but they could be cast off if they did not serve some spiritual essence of what it meant to be ‘Japanese’. The modern, individualized ‘self’ also came under attack in Japan, just as it did under the collective values of fascist Europe. As Japan became more obsessed with a spiritual mission to ‘liberate’ Asia (the practical effect of which was usually to invade and terrorize its neighbours), the Enlightenment model fell so far out of favour that one famous Japanese conference held during the war was entitled ‘Overcoming modernity’. But no major Chinese leader ever rejected the idea that China should become ‘modern’, although there were deadly disputes about the path needed to get there. Romanticism was not absent from the Chinese nationalist project (Mao Zedong, for one, was highly shaped by it), but it tended to cloak itself more in seemingly rational ideas of progress. The dedication to an Enlightenment model also led many Chinese nationalist thinkers to make an unnecessary assumption that western thought was always universally valid. In contrast, few Japanese thinkers or writers, even those who were glad to learn from the west, showed such ardent enthusiasm as the May Fourth radicals in China for rejecting their own past.

Why, though, was the Enlightenment language of ‘science and democracy’ so much more dominant in China than Japan at this time? No one reason can be found, but various factors may have played a role. First, in the late nineteenth century, Chinese intellectuals were more exposed to British, French, and American thought, all countries where Enlightenment values held strong. Japanese thinkers were exposed to all of these, but also had more contact with Germany and German romanticism in the same period. Then, China and Japan were in different global positions in the May Fourth era. Japan was now a significant power with an empire of its own, and was able to use those achievements as evidence to its own people of some indefinable but vital Japanese spirit of superiority. In the same period, China was still under pressure from imperialism and felt itself to be a victim. Therefore practical solutions that seemed to be promised by scientific progress and democratic reform may have seemed more suitable than mystical reflections on the
primordial essence of Chineseness. Additionally, the intellectual traditions of both countries had differed. China had been a great bureaucratic empire for centuries, run on a system of examinations and assessments of merit for officials, and meticulous textual criticism (kaozheng) had been part of the classical training. The Confucian penchant for order had also infused the culture with a desire for careful arrangement and categorization. This may have made the critical and scientific Enlightenment mindset a less awkward fit than it might at first have seemed. Japan also had its own tradition of textual criticism and investigation, of course. But promotion in its political system had not depended on dedication to bureaucratic scholarship; military prowess or landed wealth had been more important. In addition, the influence of religious systems of thought such as Zen and Nichiren Buddhism had been much greater in Japan. These varieties of Buddhism delighted in paradox and the flouting of rationality as a means of gaining ‘enlightenment’ in the Buddhist sense (satori). True enlightenment also demanded not just the de-emphasis of the self, in good Confucian style, but its submission and ultimate destruction. These strands of thinking provided a grounding much more favourable to European concepts of irrationality when they arrived in East Asia in the late nineteenth century.

Nationalism, then, was one of the most prominent political products of China’s encounter with modernity. In one form or another, the conception of nationhood and its attached ideology, nationalism, is at the centre of most of the politics of the May Fourth era. The approaches to nationalism differed from thinker to thinker, party to party, but the idea, developed from contact with western political thought, that a Chinese nation existed, and that it was in crisis, proved a constant theme for the May Fourth generation.

Internationalism, Cosmopolitanism, and Nationalism

Nationalism, however, was shaped in the May Fourth era by the outside world. For what, in retrospect, seems clear is that in the 1920s, China was still wide open to a universe of influence from the world outside. To understand the politics of Communism and nationalism,
and the people involved, we need to know more about rather nebulous, but very important, political and cultural phenomena which also shaped the May Fourth generation: internationalism and cosmopolitanism.

‘Nothing mattered more’, says the historian William Kirby, referring to China’s encounter with the world in the Republican era. Every aspect of life, he suggests, was affected by the international climate. This was certainly true with respect to diplomatic and military policy, of course. But it was also true for Chinese society, culture, and thought, even in places many miles away from the nearest foreigner. To try to understand China in the May Fourth era without understanding it as part of an international culture removes a large part of what made it so distinctive.

For it is a mistake to think of China as a society simply buffeted by imperialist and capitalist forces from outside, which it was powerless to resist. China was not simply a country which passively encountered the forces of modernity. Instead, it made those forces its own, adapting them in creative and often surprising ways to suit its own unique circumstances.

For mainland China, the Republican period is generally considered to have lasted from 1912 to 1949. That period, though, also coincided with a particular era of global political change. Although that ‘interwar’ period is generally defined rather uncomfortably in terms of the two dreadful conflicts which sandwiched it, it can also usefully be seen as the short age of the League of Nations. The first decade or so was the age of the great international agreements, such as the Locarno and Washington Treaties, and a sunnier, more cooperative outlook in international society, fuelled by a willingness for the League to work as an alternative to the carnage of World War I. The 1930s, known to the Japanese as ‘the valley of darkness’ (kurai tanima) and called by W. H. Auden the ‘low, dishonest decade’, marked the League’s failure, exacerbated by the world economic depression, with the rise of Hitler, Mussolini, and Japanese militarism. These generalizations also hide many complications, for the seeds of the second decade were planted in the first, but they also express wider realities about the global atmosphere
which China had to deal with during its short and turbulent Republican era.

The League is generally associated with US President Woodrow Wilson, who saw it as a means of taming the warlike Realpolitik of the old European world. Wilson also disapproved of the large European empires, and his embracing of the ‘self-determination of peoples’ led to a wholesale reconstruction of much of central and eastern Europe as well as the Middle East, which had been under the German, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman empires. New nation-states such as Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Hungary appeared on the map. Also visible was a reconstituted Poland, last sighted before its partition in 1795 and now apparent once more, although in a rather different position, sitting where much of pre-war Germany had previously been. The Allied empires of Britain and France were not, of course, dismantled, but even now, they were put on notice. Neither country attempted to seize new colonies pure and simple. Instead, blown by the Wilsonian breeze, the former Ottoman colonies in the Middle East, such as Iraq and Syria, were re-cast as ‘League Mandates’, states in a condition of embryonic independence which were under the temporary protection of the imperial powers. (Iraq, in fact, was given independence in 1932, although it was the only League mandate to reach that stage.) Empire still continued as a global and seemingly slow-changing phenomenon, but it appeared to have stopped growing larger, at least as far as the European powers were concerned. The independent nation-state was now the standard model of what countries should become.

In this context, the Washington Treaties were crucial. A series of agreements signed between nine powers in 1921–2, they set the tone for much of the liberal atmosphere of international politics in the 1920s. The US, Britain, and Japan agreed to maintain navies at an agreed ratio of relative strength of 5:5:3. Among the most important declarations was that the powers should encourage China, still in a state of political flux, to strengthen itself. A crucial part of this strengthening was to restore the country’s tariff autonomy, which had been removed in various treaties of the late nineteenth century under the Qing dynasty. Although a dispute with France meant that tariff
autonomy was not fully restored, the overall intentions were to signal to China that it was being welcomed into international society. As a further gesture, the former German colonies in Shandong, which had been handed to Japan at the Paris Peace Conference, were now restored to China. And China, of course, became a member of the new League of Nations. Since colonies were not eligible to join, this made China one of the few non-European states allowed to do so.29

This rosy view of China’s slow but steady absorption into the international community seemed plausible in Washington, London, and, to some extent, Tokyo. For patriotic Chinese themselves, though, the Washington measures seemed half-hearted and patronizing. Nonetheless, the Chinese governments of the 1920s, like the Nationalist government of Chiang Kaishek which would follow in 1928, were staffed by many sophisticated, often foreign-educated diplomats who knew that the world where the Chinese empire could unilaterally lay down its own prescriptions for dealing with the foreigners had died at the time of the Opium Wars some eight decades before. If the League of Nations and compromise with the imperial powers were necessary, then the Chinese would play that game to the best of their abilities. Participation, though, did not mean acquiescence.

A source of satisfaction for many Americans at the time was the extent to which Republican China seemed to be turning to the US as a model for progress. Certainly some Chinese authors wrote approvingly of role models such as George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, and reflections of a changing Chinese society were sent back to American readers through the pens of the writers of Henry Luce’s Time magazine and novelists such as Pearl S. Buck. The US prided itself that, unlike the arrogant old imperial powers, it was seen as a force for freedom and liberation in China.30

This was not how things appeared to all Chinese. On the one hand, the sterling efforts of many American missionaries and educationalists were appreciated by many of the Chinese who had encountered them. On the other, the US blotted its record significantly by passing the Oriental Exclusion Acts in 1924, which stopped immigration from...
East Asia in any significant numbers, and would continue to do so until the 1960s. In general, the belief of many Americans that what the Chinese really wanted and needed was for China to become more like America created misunderstandings that would lead, in part, to the tragic events of the Cold War. With their more overt resort to racism in the running of their Chinese empire (both territorial and economic), the British did not, for the most part, deceive themselves that the Chinese aspired to be like them and eventually came to understand, even if disapprovingly, the forces behind the rise of Chinese nationalism in the 1920s. For many Americans, this realization never came, and tokens of proof such as Chiang Kaishek’s controversial conversion to Christianity helped to obscure the reality. Other countries, including those of western Europe, also provided cultural and political inspiration for many Chinese, and as will be seen, the emergence of the Soviet Union provided a new source of thought for more radical Chinese of the age.

**Looking East in Europe**

Many Chinese admired aspects of the west. But they did not, for the most part, aspire to be western, even at the height of May Fourth opposition to Chinese tradition. Even the term ‘west’ is misleading when assessing what it was that many Chinese admired about the European world. Most notably, when they turned to foreign examples, it was frequently not the powerful nations, the US, Britain, and France, that they cited. Instead, within Europe, it was often east, rather than west, where they looked. For many of the May Fourth generation, the newly freed nation-states that had emerged at Versailles were a far more relevant example for them than the great empires. First, these states had done what China sought to do. Oppressed by imperial powers, in their case the Austro-Hungarian or Ottoman rulers, they had created a sense of nationhood which was driven by will and determination. In 1931, the writer Cui Weizhou described the emergence of Czechoslovakia after World War I.
The Czech nation proposed revolution . . . and everyone just laughed at their craziness, pitying their weakness and saying that they might sacrifice themselves but they would never be successful . . . Their people struggled without concern for themselves and gave their strength to help them. Finally, after the Paris Conference of 1919, the Austro-Hungarian empire fell apart and they set up a state for the whole Czech people.31

Eastern Europe was also relevant to the Chinese because western Europeans had always considered the east of their own continent, like China, to be the ‘Other’, a dark, mysterious place not governed by the rules of reason. The ‘Philosophic Geography’ of the Enlightenment era defined eastern Europe as practically Asiatic, a place of irrationality and barbarism quite separate from the scientific and rational west. The British radical politician William Cobbett, speaking in 1801 on the subject of diplomacy with eastern Europe, made a specific comparison with China when arguing that one had to use go-betweens: ‘What political relations can we have with countries situated between the Niemen and the Boristhenes [Dnieper]? We maintain communications with these countries by Riga, much in the same manner that we maintain a communication with China by Canton.’32 Many of the western philosophers, including Voltaire and Rousseau, who wrote about eastern Europe had never actually visited the region. Nor, indeed, had many Chinese in the early twentieth century; but that did not stop the idea of this place looming large in their minds. Just as western Europe regarded eastern Europe and China alike as barbarous lands striving for modernity, so many thoughtful Chinese saw solidarity with the emerging European nations which were countering this image and seeking a strong role for themselves in the modern world.

Because few Chinese had visited the region, the Chinese view of eastern Europe was often one that bore little resemblance to reality. Poland had been dismembered and disappeared from the map of Europe in 1795, and this terrible fate gave it a mythical position in the minds of the late Qing Chinese: a new verb, ‘to Poland’, appeared in Chinese, meaning ‘to be destroyed and vanish’. Yet this was just one of a plethora of references to the region.33 The late Qing reformer Liang Qichao had also cited the Hungarian liberator Lajos Kossuth as

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an inspirational figure for the development of Chinese nationhood. The thinkers of the Qing, of course, were still having to deal with an eastern Europe whose national aspirations were embryonic. In the Republican period, in contrast, these same states now stood as a glorious example of what could be successfully achieved.

The fact that these Chinese writers were not drawing on direct experience of life in eastern Europe is indicative in its own right. Their willingness to learn from international examples and link their own lives and China’s fate to currents that were seemingly far removed from their own concerns shows the cosmopolitan and eclectic way in which the May Fourth generation sought a new path for China. These people were not constrained by inward-looking or xenophobic ideas of what it meant to be Chinese. To create a strong, stable China, they would look anywhere, however unlikely-seeming, for inspiration.

**Not Just West and East: Thinking Beyond Europe**

Yet the European world, west and east, was not the limit of the May Fourth imagination. Zou Taofen, for instance, drew on a wide and refreshing range of influences to force himself and his readers to think about what China’s crisis really meant. At that time, the number of non-European reformers who had modernized free states was limited, so perhaps it was inevitable that Zou Taofen used his platform at *Life* to explore the life of the most famous of them, although his subject would have balked at being described as non-European. That was one of the most prominent reformers of the era, Mustapha Kemal (known from 1934 as Atatürk), to whom Zou dedicated a three-part series in 1928, five years after the establishment of the Turkish Republic. ‘Turkey in the Near East and China in the Far East have a lot of points in common’, observed Zou. ‘When we see how Turkey has pulled itself out of such a dangerous crisis, we must be even more sure to win out in China’s future.’34 In many ways, the Turkish experience was indeed most directly similar to what Chinese May Fourth nationalists wanted for China (and even the earlier 1908 Turkish revolution had been a source of interest to the late Qing
nationalists). Kemal had taken a decaying empire which had been
defeated in war, overthrown it, and declared a political and cultural
revolution from 1920 onwards. Zou explained the major reforms
which had taken place in the new Turkish republic:

On 29 October 1923, the national assembly formally declared that Turkey
had become a democratic republic \[minzbuguo\], and that Kemal was elected
as the first president. From this moment, an extraordinary period [of revolu-
tion] came to an end, and a period of reconstruction began. On 21 April 1924,
[Kemal] formally promulgated the Turkish constitution. In terms of
reconstruction, he reformed national education, improved the law, encour-
aged agriculture, industry, and commerce, improved the position of women,
and so forth. Everything was positively carried forward, and every day, it
flourished more and more.36

This technocratic, progressive vision clearly appealed to Zou. In add-
ition to the reforms he listed above, in Kemal’s Turkey, the state was
secularized, the script was reformed from Arabic to Roman letters,
and Turkish nationalism was made a compulsory ideological element
in all aspects of social and political life. This was different in many
ways from the Meiji reforms in Japan, the other most obvious
example of conversion from premodernity to modern nation-
statehood in a short period: Japan had made religious ritual an inte-
gral part of its nationalism, women were not declared equal under
the Meiji constitution (unlike Turkish women, who could vote and
be elected in the 1930s, Japanese women had to wait until the American
Occupation in 1945 to get the vote), and a remodelled version of the
Japanese imperial past was embraced, not rejected, by the state. In
other ways, too, the vision of Chinese nationalists such as Sun Yatsen
was more like that of Kemal than Japan. In particular, Turkish
‘democracy’ meant a one-party state in practice; something, as we
will see later, that Sun Yatsen believed was necessary as well. Japan,
meanwhile, had developed multi-party democracy with wide male
suffrage. Kemal, then, was an obvious choice for Zou to appeal to, as a
successful secular, nationalist unifier of a nation-state.

Perhaps more surprising was another figure to whom Zou returned
far more often than to Kemal: Gandhi. Gandhi was, of course, a
powerful nationalist figure, although it was not clear at the time Zou wrote about him that he would in fact achieve his goals. Yet a great deal of what motivated him, in particular faith and spirituality, were very alien to the parts of the May Fourth Movement that rejected the past, or to the ideas of saving China through entrepreneurialism. Nonetheless, Gandhi got his own three-part series in 1929, celebrating his 60th birthday. ‘India’s caste system, religion and language are complex, this is famous around the world,’ Zou wrote, ‘but all are united in respect for Gandhi, and even his political enemies cannot help but be moved by his sacrificial spirit and character.’ Although British military power was strong, ‘in reality, the whole of India is controlled by this ordinary man with a weak body, short stature, and wearing torn clothes’. In fact, Zou hardly touched on the religious nature of Gandhi’s identity, and instead dwelled on the achievements which he felt would have most resonance for his readers. One of these was Gandhi’s boycott of foreign textiles in favour of native homespun cloth, an agenda also encouraged by the National Products Movement. However, Zou was hopeful in his summation of Gandhi’s nationalist programme of non-violence and non-cooperation. ‘This has a lot of value for consultation in China’, he noted.

In the end, Gandhian non-violence was a path not taken by Chinese political thinkers and actors in the twentieth century. The nature of the Chinese crisis turned it towards what the historian Hans van de Ven has termed ‘cultures of violence’, the result of attempts to mobilize a society which was highly internally divided, leading political actors to conclude that they had little choice but to use force to achieve their ends. Even though many of the May Fourth generation deplored this, they were forced to deal with violence or else be left behind by reality. Nor was the May Fourth Movement itself free of taint in this regard. After all, the events of 4 May 1919, although they had started with dignified and peaceful protest, had ended up with a man left for dead covered with bruises ‘that looked like fish-scales’, and a house smashed and burned. The protestors who decried militarism were capable of mob action when it suited them. Significantly, the visit of Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel...
Prize-winning Indian poet, to China in 1924 met with scorn from the most radical of the May Fourth generation. Tagore gave lectures on the need for Asia to develop its spiritual and non-materialist qualities, only to be attacked by Chen Duxiu, by then the secretary-general of the CCP, and the novelist Mao Dun, who said that the best reply to imperialism and militarism was ‘Reply to our enemies’ machine guns with Chinese machine guns; answer their cannons with our cannons.’41

Organization was another reason why the Gandhian solution did not find much appeal in China. Among the reasons for Gandhi’s success at home were his own great moral authority, but also crucial was the establishment of his political vehicle, the Congress Party, as the main exponent of non-sectarian Indian nationalism through a mass-membership party, united against one clear imperialist opponent. Although the Congress Party did not organize successfully across the whole of India, the party and leaders including Gandhi and Nehru had a geographical reach and political prestige that the Chinese political parties could not match in the 1920s. There was no Gandhi-like figure in China, nor did any of the parties, as we will see, achieve that kind of mass following, though they spoke often of trying to gain it. Marxism instead became the primary option for expressing political progressivism, and even Zou had turned to Marxism by 1930. Radical nationalism and Communism both also rejected significant parts of China’s past, as expressed in folk religion, which they termed ‘superstition’. Yet such religion was highly popular with the ordinary people; the experience of imperialism may have discredited China’s past for some of the elites, but not for the population at large. Again, aggressive secularization could have perhaps worked to establish a nation-state if there had been an Atatürk-type figure with the control that he had had over the armed forces. As it was, there was not, much though Chiang Kaishek might have liked to fill a similar role.

Of course, Atatürk and Gandhi did not in the end provide political salvation for China. But it is worth remembering that Zou’s essays, and their wide readership, offered a wide variety of political options to his readers. The decision that China’s path might lie with the
Nationalist or Communist Party came quite late: in the 1920s, there was a ferment of options for people disillusioned by the tawdriness and hollowness of the political options available so early in the life of a Chinese Republic which had started, like Weimar Germany, with high hopes just a few years before.

**Japan’s Promise, Japan’s Menace**

The final non-European nation which influenced this generation, and the most controversial one, was Japan. Oppressor, imperialist, friend, mentor: Japan and the Japanese were all these and more during the May Fourth era. An old saying had it that the relationship between Japan and China was ‘as close as that between lips and teeth’, but that closeness was hardly a source of stability.

Japan and China had been in similar positions in the late nineteenth century. Both countries had been opened up at gunpoint by the western powers, primarily Britain for the Chinese and the US for the Japanese. Yet Japan had taken a radically different path from its larger neighbour. Where China had tried to limit the amount of impact that its clash with imperialism would have on the state, after a few years of attempted compromise, the centuries-old shogunate (regency) system which had closed Japan to the outside world was ended by a short civil war, and a new generation of oligarchs took over. The name they gave to their coup, the Meiji Restoration, became shorthand for the series of stunning political and social changes they made to Japan within a few decades. Learning from western techniques, the Meiji rulers decreed, was the only way to defeat them. Rather than take the ambivalent attitude towards reform of the Qing court, the Meiji rulers introduced constitutionalism, compulsory military service, and massive technological and industrial change. At the same time, they used a western political ideology, nationalism, to revise and revive premodern strands of Japanese thought, such as Shinto and Buddhism. There was rarely any question that the nature of Japanese reform had strong indigenous roots even while adhering to the demands of modernity.42

This synthesis did not happen in China. Over and over again, Qing
authors lament the unwillingness of the Chinese court and wider society to learn from Japan. Yet emulating Japan became more problematic as one particular aspect of their imitation of the west became more obvious: the drive for empire. To sit at the top table, the Japanese government decided, it must seek an empire in Asia, and with increased influence in Korea from the 1880s, it was clear that the formerly reclusive island state now intended to recast itself as a regional power. China, of course, had never been against empire in principle: in the eighteenth century, it had become one of the world’s great land empires as it conquered much of central Asia. But this time, the victim was likely to be China itself. Struggles over influence in Korea led to the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–5, in which the Japanese victory forced the Chinese to cede the island of Taiwan. More humiliatingly, in 1904–5, two rival imperial powers, Japan and Russia, fought with each other for influence on Chinese territory in Manchuria, which the Qing could do nothing about; again, Japan won, leading to its foothold in southern Manchuria, which would eventually lead to the great crisis of 1931. Therefore, the real admiration that many Chinese had for Japan as an Asian power that had stood up to western imperialism was tempered heavily by the realization that Japan’s own imperial ambitions were likely to target more and more of China, and that Japan often acted on Chinese territory every bit as arrogantly as western imperialists. Du Zhongyuan, in describing the path that had made him an entrepreneur, had said: ‘I considered that we should certainly feel hatred for the Japanese invasion of China, but we should absolutely take their creative and hardworking spirit as a model.’ This ambivalence summed up the complex position that Japan held in the minds of the New Culture generation looking abroad for solutions to China’s crisis.

Party Politics

We have taken quite a long time to get to the two groups most commonly associated with the politics of the Republican period: the Chinese Communist Party and the Nationalist Party. This has been deliberate. Elite party politics has so often been the most obvious,
and most appropriate, framework in which to situate the narrative of modern China. Who could deny the importance of these two great parties who fought for power over a quarter of humanity? However, I have waited this long in large part to make clear the context of politics in China at this time. First, these two parties emerged from a welter of different possible paths that Chinese nationalism and modernity could have taken. As it turned out, China’s two major political parties would both subscribe to a variety of secular Enlightenment modernity. Additionally, politics was not primarily a matter of party affiliation for most people, and political engagement for many, even in the May Fourth generation, was better achieved through committed journalism or literature. Certainly the party-based narrative that is appropriate to explain much about the US, Britain, France, or even Japan at this time fails to capture a great deal of what was important contemporaneously in China. The CCP would later claim that the May Fourth Movement’s logical outcome was the foundation of the Party itself. Yet, as is clear, the movement was really a huge bundle of contradictory possibilities of which the Party’s foundation was only one, and not even initially the most important.

Nonetheless, one cannot deal with the May Fourth era and ignore these immensely important bodies which emerged from the ensuing creative chaos and occupied most of the space that had been made available for free-thinking.

The Communists

The Chinese Communist Party did not start as a carefully disciplined organization, but changed drastically between 1921 and 1927. At the start of that period, the future leaders of the party, such as Chen Duxiu, Cai Hesen, and of course Mao Zedong, were intellectuals and students associated with the heady atmosphere of possibility in China’s cities, holding discussions in ‘study societies’ where exciting new ideas, often from the west, were analysed in an informal group of like-minded, politically engaged people. By the end of the decade, under the influence of the Soviet Comintern and after the bruising experience of war and strategy against the militarists who ruled
China, the party was a much more disciplined, ordered organization, with clear hierarchies and policies. How did the May Fourth period give birth to this machine which would eventually rule China?

To start with, the first writings that we have by the men (and they were practically all men) who founded the CCP were not about Communism at all, and in fact Marxism comes into their writings only late in the proceedings. Social Darwinism and the links between the body politic and the literal bodies of the Chinese population were much more on their minds, and many of the earliest writings of Mao are on the importance of physical exercise. Socialism, as opposed to Marxism, had been of great interest in China in the late Qing and early Republic. Anarchism in particular had inspired many, and Mao regarded the Russian anarchist Kropotkin as more of an influence on him than Marx in his early days.46

The 1917 Revolution in Russia changed views suddenly and radically. Marxism did not, as the Soviets later liked to imply, come fully formed into China after 1917, brought to innocent Chinese by wise Russian revolutionaries. The socialist background in China meant that by the time that the Bolsheviks took power in Russia, there was already a strong Chinese intellectual understanding of the different leftist positions. However, the Russian Revolution was crucial in letting at least some thinkers believe that Marxism, and Bolshevism in particular, might be a feasible way to bring about change in China.47

The close-knit intellectual atmosphere in Beijing made it a perfect spot for the big questions about Communism in China to be investigated. As it became clear that the change in government in Russia meant not just the fall of a regime, but a whole new system of government, interest grew. Here was another long-established empire which had collapsed; what lessons did its fall have for China? Li Dazhao, now the head librarian at Peking University, was the first to write extensively on the revolution. In 1918, he wrote a piece entitled ‘The Victory of Bolshevism’, published in New Youth. It was written in the aftermath of the Allied victory in Europe, but even before the Versailles Treaty which would trigger the 1919 May Fourth demonstrations, Li expressed doubts that the war’s results would be good for China, and scorned his fellow-countrymen who believed that they
would: ‘politicians hold celebratory meetings, and generals who never led a single soldier in the year or so that China participated in the war, review parades of troops and are awe-inspiringly martial.’ Yet Li argues that it was in fact the victory of ‘German socialism over German militarism’, not the Allies, which was the ‘real cause for

Mao Zedong was one of the founders of the Chinese Communist Party. Outraged by the social injustice and desperate poverty he saw as a young man, he came to the conclusion that only a radical political solution could save China. In the mid-1930s, he began his rise to become the undisputed leader of the Party.

victory’, and that more widely, it was ‘the victory of Bolshevism, the red flag, the working class of the world, and the victory of the new tide of the twentieth century’. The Bolsheviks, Li argued, aimed ‘to break down the national boundaries which today are the obstacle blocking socialism,’ and ‘their war is class war . . . Although the word Bolshevism was coined by Russians, its spirit is a spirit of enlightenment that every member of mankind can share’.

A few months later, Li set up a discussion group, later more formally constituted as the ‘Marxist Research Society’, at his office in the university, where a few colleagues and students would discuss the implications of Marxist thought. Chen Duxiu, then dean of the university and editor of New Youth, decided to sponsor a special edition of the journal on the topic of Marxism. As the discussions on Marxism progressed over the next couple of years, the members of the group found themselves ready to commit to the formation of the first Chinese Communist Party, which held its first official Congress in Shanghai in 1921. Yet with just a few hundred members, it was a long way from any prospect of power.

The Nationalists

The Nationalists, or Kuomintang, have often been caricatured as the dark opposite to the Communists: tools of the imperialists, traitors to China, lackeys of a few privileged classes. Such a characterization does scant justice to a group who were very much part of the project of modernity which the May Fourth Movement embodied. Indeed, it was the similarity of the Nationalists to the Communists in so many areas that made their mutual hatred so much more intense.

For most of the period until the 1940s, the Nationalists, not the Communists, were the face of public party politics in China. Zhu Su’e recalled many years later that she had joined the Nationalists in college in 1928. This was the year after the event that would later be regarded as the great betrayal, the 1927 massacre of their former Communist allies in Shanghai. But that did not bother Zhu at the time: ‘Guomindang [the Nationalist party] was led by Sun Zhongshan...
[Sun Yatsen] and had overthrown the Qing dynasty. There was nothing wrong about that, and it was in power.\footnote{49}

The Party itself had been born under pressure. The Revolutionary League of the late Qing activist Sun Yatsen, finding itself outpaced by the unexpected revolution in 1911, reconstituted itself in 1912 as the Nationalist Party. It ran in the 1912 elections on a platform that stressed the importance of reducing the power of the new president, Yuan Shikai, who had forced the provisional president, Sun himself, out of power after just a few weeks. The Party did extremely well in the elections, finding itself the largest single group in parliament, but its attempts to negotiate with Yuan were cut short by the assassination of the prime minister-designate, Song Jiaoren, on Shanghai railway station. The following year, Yuan declared the Nationalist Party illegal, and Sun had to flee to Tokyo, where he re-established his group as the Revolutionary Party (Gemingdang). Although he was able to return to China in 1916 after Yuan’s death, Sun was buffeted by challenges to his leadership and an inability, or perhaps unwillingness, to deal firmly with the unstable and swiftly changing militarist politics which dominated China for the next decade. Having to move location and finding himself unable to settle a programme, he finally moved to Shanghai in 1920 and announced the re-formation of the Nationalist Party. In doing so, he found himself in the city shortly after the May Fourth Movement had extended its shockwaves beyond Beijing, leading to mass boycotts of goods produced by the imperial powers.\footnote{50}

What did the Nationalist Party believe? In one sense, it was founded in swift response to the welcome but disconcerting change in Sun’s political circumstances in 1911. For the previous few decades, like so many other revolutionary thinkers, Sun had become convinced that the formation of a nation-state, drawn in large part from the model introduced from the west, was the way in which China should seek to strengthen itself. For Sun, as for late Qing anti-Manchu political activists such as Zou Rong and Zhang Binglin, the idea of the nation-state had become heavily tied to ideas of race by the turn of the century. Encouraged by western race theory and Social Darwinism, it became plausible for the revolutionaries to argue that China’s problem lay not just in the symptom of oppression.
by western and Japanese imperialism, but the deeper cause of a deca-
dent Manchu race, exemplified in the Qing dynasty, ruling over the
oppressed Han (ethnic Chinese) people which now had to be
recalled to its national ‘destiny’. In this, they partly echoed the
Taiping rebels who had convulsed China half a century before, and
whose eccentric interpretation of Christianity (their leader, Hong
Xiuquan, believed himself to be Jesus’s younger brother) incorpo-
rated virulent hatred for the Manchus.

Yet the downfall of the Manchu dynasty in 1912 quickly removed
the impetus from the racial element of the revolutionary message. In
the Republican era, a new era of citizenship, in which ordinary
Chinese accustomed themselves to modern symbols and ceremonies,
emerged. Urban and rural culture changed dramatically, from

Sun Yatsen was a prominent revolutionary activist against the Qing dynasty.
However, his attempt to gain power in the new Republic after 1911 failed in the
face of opposition from stronger militarist leaders. His memory is now
honoured in China, where he is revered as the ‘father of the country’.

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the cutting off of men’s queues (the long braid of hair which Han Chinese men had had to wear under the Manchus) to the wearing of new, modern suits of clothes (what we think of as a ‘Mao suit’ was originally a ‘Sun Yatsen suit’) to the use of new western-style calendars and the establishment of a calendar, still used in Taiwan today, that counted years ‘since the Republic’. Racial division within China, while not absent, was no longer a defining characteristic of the political scene, although outrage at the racial hierarchies perpetrated by the imperial powers remained strong. Therefore, the newly formed Nationalist Party sought to make itself suitable for a China which was growing into civic republicanism. It advocated democracy, though the precise definition of the term, itself relatively newly introduced to China, was elusive. The period in exile, though, gave Sun space to think in the longer term rather than having to deal with fast-changing events such as the revolution, the election, and their aftermath. In 1920, Sun gave speeches that put forward the political philosophy which would from then on be associated with his name: the Three People’s Principles (San minzhuyi).

These principles have often been neglected or mocked as incoherent by later interpreters. It is certainly true that they were never as carefully worked through as Mao’s variations on Marxism, nor did they have the international influence that Mao’s did. Yet Sun was a powerful enough figure that Mao himself, in his 1940 speech ‘On New Democracy’, felt it necessary to pay homage to them and declare that the CCP was putting forward a new Three People’s Principles as he sought to widen the Party’s appeal. For Zou Taofen, Sun’s thought continued to be a primary inspiration in the 1920s and remained important even when Zou moved towards Marxism in the 1930s. Furthermore, they reflected many of the concerns for freedom and modernity that so animated the May Fourth era, even though they are not generally considered part of that generation’s legacy.

The principles were minzu, minquan, and minsheng, most conveniently, if not entirely accurately, translated as ‘nationalism, democracy, and socialism’. In fact, none of the terms could be translated quite that neatly, nor had they the fixed and relatively uncomplicated meanings that these later translations implied. Take minzu first. The
term itself, a neologism imported from Japan by writers such as Liang Qichao, meant literally something along the lines of ‘people’s descent group’ or ‘people’s clan’. There was an implication of racial kinship that the western term ‘nation’ might imply, but would not necessarily demand. The difficulty in using this term was tacitly acknowledged by Sun and the early founders of the Republic, who referred to it as a state of five minzu (Chinese, Mongols, Manchus, Tibetans, and Muslims), but the ill-defined coincidence between the racial nation and the nation-state which dogged the Republic from the beginning was not resolved by this uneasy formulation.53 Next, there was ‘democracy’. China is not the only modernizing society where the term has been used in varying and competing ways. But in fact, the term that became the most common for ‘democracy’, minzhu, meaning ‘people’s rule’, is not the one Sun uses here. Minquan has more of an implication of ‘people’s rights’, but the implications of this are somewhat different from a system where the people themselves actually embody political power. The term harks back to the ‘popular rights’ (minken) movement in Meiji-era Japan, but democracy had only flowed slowly in Japan even after the flowering of that popular movement. Finally, minsheng translates best as ‘people’s livelihood’, an alternative version which is less concise but also found fairly frequently. It was perhaps the most vaguely defined of Sun’s aspirations, though, and ‘socialism’ perhaps gives too concrete an air to the well-intentioned programme of social reform which he failed to define. Yet these writings reflect the atmosphere of the new China too, as it emerged into an international atmosphere of ‘rights’ and political participation that marked the citizenry of a nation rather than the subjects of an empire. Furthermore, the ambiguity of the terms themselves reflects the fluid nature of the politics of the era as people scrambled to comprehend and interpret the new political vocabulary that had been thrust upon them.

Nationalists and Communists, United and Divided

The last phase of Sun Yatsen’s life coincided with the first phase of the fledgling Communist Party. As the 1920s dawned, it was clear that
the outburst of anger which had been seen at all levels of Chinese society during the May Fourth demonstrations and their aftermath had not yet transformed itself into a coherent political movement. Sun had attempted to gain support from various sources for his dream of returning to power: militarist leaders, the western powers, and even the Japanese. But his courtship was in vain.

In any case, his disillusionment with the great powers, particularly after the slaughter of World War I and the betrayal of Chinese interests at the Paris Peace Conference, was becoming ever greater. Yet the changed international situation now came to his aid. The newly born Soviet Russia (as it was then generally known), still fighting for its own life in a vicious civil war, was also looking to export its revolutionary diplomacy abroad. In 1923, Sun met a representative of the Comintern, the organization of the new Soviet Russian state dedicated to fomenting international revolution, and sealed a pact that saw the next important stage in the parties’ development: the United Front between the Nationalists and Communists, sponsored by the Soviets. All three participants benefited. For the Soviets, this was a chance to foment revolution. Marxist-Leninist theory held that China was too backward for a Communist revolution to take place immediately. Instead, a ‘national bourgeois’ revolution had to come first, and the Nationalists were the appropriate party to carry that revolution out: therefore, they needed to be supported at this stage. The Nationalists at last had the kind of powerful sponsor they had sought throughout their years in the wilderness. First, the Soviets gave them the kind of Leninist organizational discipline that had served the Russian party well. At least as importantly, they also helped organize a military training school, the Whampoa Academy, on an island south of Guangzhou (Canton). And for the Communists, who were still a small party without the wider popularity and reputation of the Nationalists, this was a chance to ride to power on the back of two powerful revolutionary forces, the Comintern and the Nationalists. For much of the period of the United Front (1923–7), it was often quite hard to distinguish between the Communists and the more left-wing, revolutionary members of the Nationalist Party.

A turning point, though it was only clearly perceived as such later
on, was the death of Sun in 1925. Suffering from liver cancer, the iconic figure of the Chinese revolution, who had nonetheless enjoyed little real power throughout his life, left an uncertain legacy. It was unclear who was to be his true heir. Among the contenders were Wang Jingwei, who was more socially progressive, and Hu Hanmin, who was more conservative. Eventually to win out, though, was the head of the military section at the Whampoa Military Academy, Chiang Kai-shek. Chiang did not have the ideological prestige of contenders such as Wang Jingwei, but his prominent role within the party’s military organization, as well as his ties to local elites, meant that he was able to command sufficient clout to gain the leadership for himself. The alliance with the CCP and Soviets continued as it had before Sun’s death, and an opportunity to strike against the forces of warlordism and imperialism, promoted as China’s two principal enemies, emerged later the same year. Many accounts of the rise of nationalism in China have suggested that a direct line can be drawn between the events of 4 May 1919 in Beijing and those of 30 May 1925 in Shanghai.

Like the May Fourth Movement, the May Thirtieth Movement was a wide social phenomenon which took its name from a particular incident. Chinese workers organized a demonstration protesting against the violent ending of a strike and lockout over working conditions in a Japanese-owned factory in the International Settlement of Shanghai, as well as the arrest of several Chinese students. The settlement police, whose squad was made up of Indian and Chinese, became panicked by the crowd and fired into it, killing 11 people. Rage spread across the cities, resulting in demonstrations against imperialism and boycotts of foreign goods.

The Communists and Nationalists were able to take advantage of the heightened political atmosphere to launch their National Revolutionary Army on the Northern Expedition. Between 1926 and 1928, the Expedition, actually a powerful military campaign, moved up China’s eastern seaboard, conquering or persuading the militarist leaders to join the Nationalist movement. Meanwhile, Chiang began to show an increasing reluctance to cooperate with his CCP allies, and negotiated forcefully with the Comintern adviser, Borodin, to
restrict their role within the Nationalist Party structure. However, the revolutionary strategy of the Nationalists appeared to be paying off on the global scale, with the increasing willingness of the imperial powers to consider recognizing their government instead of the militarist-controlled one based in Beijing.

The endgame came with the Northern Expedition’s capture of the most prestigious prize, Shanghai, in spring 1927. Although the United Front did not antagonize the imperial powers by attempting to seize the International Settlement or the French Concession, they fomented strikes and mass demonstrations which eventually led to the fall of the Chinese-controlled part of the city to Nationalist and Communist forces. However, Chiang had by now decided that the CCP were to have no further part in his vision of Nationalist China. He used his contacts among local elites and the underworld, in particular the notorious Green Gang crime cartel, to round up and massacre large numbers of the known CCP members and sympathizers in the city. The United Front was over, as far as Chiang was concerned. The summer of 1927 saw desperate attempts by the CCP and Comintern to form an alliance with the left wing of the Nationalists, based in Wuhan under the leadership of Wang Jingwei, who did not recognize Chiang’s arrogation to himself of the leadership of the Nationalist revolution. But by the end of the year, the more radical Nationalists had made their peace with Chiang, recognizing the superior military and financial power that he had at his disposal, and the CCP, after another failed uprising in Guangzhou in December, found itself isolated and on the run.54

Did Sun Yatsen’s political thought, which was supposed to underpin the Nationalist revolution and government, get significant popular exposure? Certainly, for Zou Taofen, he was the one contemporary Chinese figure worth writing about in Life.55 For many people in Shanghai, marginally involved with or interested in political life, Zou’s pieces may well have been one of the few ways in which the thought of Sun actually filtered into the real experience of ordinary people. As we noted earlier, political theory and political parties were hardly at the centre of the New Culture changes for grassroots Chinese and even for many more educated and elite urban-dwellers.
during that period: free love or new employment possibilities had a far greater direct effect on their lives. *Life* magazine was part of that new way of life too: something inspiring, interesting, and not too taxing to read at the end of a tiring day dealing with one’s sexually harassing boss, demanding teacher, or tiring struggle with the petty cash accounts. If, in the midst of all this, there was an accessible essay by a trusted columnist, Zou Taofen, on Sun Yatsen and his thought, then it might well be read. Zou remained supportive of the Nationalist government into the 1930s; he did not desert Sun Yatsen’s party until the Manchurian crisis led him to lose faith in their ability to keep the nation stable and whole. However, Zou’s concentration on Sun’s thought is in part an indication of how threadbare the repertoire of indigenous, modern Chinese thought was at this time. The bald fact was that there had been only a few decades in which the various threads of western thought, including Enlightenment modernity and Christianity, had been available to Chinese thinkers to adapt, reject, or embrace. Still remaining was the long-standing treasury of pre-modern Chinese thought, epitomized by Confucianism. It was not surprising that people like Zou felt that Chinese thought should be allowed to engage with modernity, and that simply rejecting all that it had to offer was too hasty.

THE QUESTION OF WOMAN

The urgent issues of gender relations were often marginalized or absent in the political discourses discussed in this chapter: Sun Yatsenism, revised Confucianism, Gandhianism, and even, to a large extent, Communism and nationalism. But in fact, there was a significant feminist movement in the era, although it was later suppressed both by the Nationalists and the CCP. From girls and young women working in the factories, to the new professionals such as Zhu Su’e, to the girls in the park fearing what foreigners would say about their harassers, women, and men, were in a new world where Confucian norms could no longer operate.

Discussions about how the Confucian family structure needed to be reformed were largely shaped by ‘the search of young urban males.
for a new identity in a modernizing, industrializing society. In addition, the majority of the writing on the ‘woman question’ in journals such as New Youth was by men, and there were real difficulties in women gaining, or wishing to gain, ‘independent personhood’ (duli renge) in the context of May Fourth humanist liberalism which did not necessarily choose to emphasize the differences, as opposed to similarities, in the liberation of the sexes.

Nonetheless, there was a powerful autonomous feminist voice during this period. The historian Christina Gilmartin declared that ‘The Chinese revolution of the mid-1920s encompassed the most comprehensive effort to alter gender relations and end women’s subordination of all of China’s twentieth-century revolutions’ – in other words, more even than the Communist revolution of 1949. During this time, women who joined the Communist Party in particular did so in significant part to articulate their own struggle against patriarchy. The most prominent female CCP leader of the era was Xiang Jingyu, though she found her path in the party was largely dependent on her relationships with prominent male leaders within the CCP, and that the concerns of female emancipation were repeatedly sidelined to accommodate the need to ingratiate the party with the prejudices of poor rural males whom the party wished to mobilize. Xiang Jingyu was executed in 1927 during a campaign of terror by the Nationalist government, which regarded the feminist movement as part of a wider social turmoil that would lead, unchecked, to anarchy.

Yet there were hopeful signs too. Nominally at least, women were given suffrage and civil rights by the new Nationalist government after 1927 (as in Turkey but unlike Japan), although the reality of endlessly delayed democracy and flagrant civil rights abuses applied to men and women alike. Also, there were new working opportunities for women, although this is sometimes forgotten: as Wang Zheng observes in her introduction to her analysis of women’s oral histories: ‘As a woman born after 1949, I had absolutely no idea before I met these women that such a large number of independent career women existed before liberation.’ Among the women interviewed by Wang was Zhu Su’e, who became one of the first women lawyers in China,
qualifying in 1930. Although most of Zou Taofen’s stories of role models in Life were about men, he did identify inspirational women too, such as Marie Curie. ‘Many countries have women poets, women writers, women educators and all types of leaders,’ he observed, ‘but which country has a woman scientist like Mme Curie?’

Nonetheless, looking at the way in which the history of twentieth-century China has developed, it is clear that feminism has repeatedly been sacrificed for other goals: class warfare, conflict against Japan, and in the post-1978 reform era, the need to build up a strong, internationally competitive China. As with other aspects of free-thinking, the May Fourth era was more open and accommodating to feminism than the eras that have followed it. However, even at this time, feminism did not become a necessary, dominant theme. As we have seen, writers as different in tone and purpose as Lu Xun, Zou Taofen, and Ding Ling all came to grips both with gender relations and with what was then known as the ‘woman question’ (never, of course, the ‘man question’). Yet for all of them, the goal of gender equality seemed to slip away. In Lu Xun’s case, it fell victim to the wider lack of confidence that he felt for Chinese society as a whole; in Zou’s case, it was subsumed by his over-willingness to assume that the patriarchy could not be tackled too quickly, and his later turn to Marxism which subsumed women’s issues beneath the wider issues of (male) unemployment and war with Japan; and Ding Ling, who stuck to the feminist cause in her writings even after throwing in her lot with the CCP, found herself receiving public criticism from the Maoist party in the Yan’an base area in the 1940s for concerning herself with such bourgeois, urban matters. Zou and Du Zhongyuan, we must also remember, were commercial publishers and writers as well as activists: perhaps during the downturn of the 1930s, they felt that too strident a stress on feminist issues would alienate their core readership of men. Certainly the female characters in their journals from the mid-1930s are shriller and rather more one-dimensional than the complex voices that had appeared in the ‘Readers’ Mailbox’ of the 1920s. Times of crisis seemed to throw male writers and politicians towards what were perceived as masculine values of martial prowess.
Conclusion: Goodbye May Fourth?

In many interpretations, 1927 is the year when Chiang Kaishek betrayed his CCP colleagues and sold out China’s chance of revolutionary social change. Certainly Lu Xun and Ding Ling, both of whom were involved with CCP politics by that stage, felt deeply betrayed by the way that the Northern Expedition had turned out. They were not alone, and there was a turn towards the CCP on the part of many thoughtful Chinese worried about China’s future and the political crises that continued to tear it apart.

Their was one very reasonable interpretation of events. However, it did not appear that way at the time to many others. The dominant understanding among those who were interested in politics was rather different. After years of feuding, China had a new government. Chiang Kaishek had declared the establishment of his Nationalist administration in Nanjing in 1928, and it was given international diplomatic recognition fairly fast. In retrospect, this has been seen as the recognition of a ‘safe’ government sympathetic to bourgeois and capitalist interests. Yet at the time, the Nationalist government was an unknown, and in some ways quite frightening, prospect for both of those groups. It was just a few months since British diplomats had referred to Chiang, then in alliance with the CCP, as ‘the little red general’. Although it became clear, to the approval of these same groups, that the Nationalist government would be virulently anti-Communist, its other policies were hardly designed to offer comfort to the foreign powers. First and foremost, the Nationalists saw themselves as a revolutionary party, emphatically not a party of the status quo, and Sun Yatsen’s declaration that ‘the revolution is not yet complete’ was stamped on official documents of the new government. Although the Nationalists certainly saw themselves as taking up the legacy of the 1911 revolution, they did not consider themselves yet to have completed their task. For that, they would need to work through the programme of Sun Yatsen: nationalism, democracy, and socialism.

The most notable aspect of the nationalism that the Nationalists espoused was anti-imperialism. Although they were prepared to take a relatively gradual approach with the foreign powers, there was
never any question that Chiang’s aim was to recover sovereignty over
the Chinese territory ruled by the imperial powers, end extraterritoriality, and create a strong, stable Chinese nation-state. This was
not a client regime of the imperialist powers, however much it might
appease them on a tactical basis. With a government that was estab-
lished but still unstable and buffeted from all sides, it would have
been surprising if Chiang had been able to take a harder line than he
did on imperialism.

On democracy, Chiang took refuge in the same formulation that
Sun himself had done, claiming that while democracy was desirable,
the Nationalist Party would have to offer a long period of ‘tutelage’
to the people to educate them into understanding what democracy
meant. However, it is worth noting that the Nationalists always stuck
to the language of democracy even when at their most corrupt and
brutal. The dominant language of New Culture ‘enlightenment’ was
not rejected even when they railed at many of its manifestations.
Similarly, the USSR’s determination to stick to a language derived
from the Enlightenment does, in some fundamental sense, differenti-
ate it from fascism and Nazism, which based their world-view on a
conscious rejection of Enlightenment values, even if the results of
‘Enlightenment’ in the USSR were irrational and horrifying. Good
intentions are not enough. But they are not irrelevant either. The
model of modernity that the Nationalists put forward was still an
Enlightenment one. The great failure of the Nationalist dictatorship
was that, like other Chinese governments that came before and after,
it failed to institutionalize difference, the ability to recognize that an
alternative viewpoint was not necessarily treacherous. (This was, in
contrast, the great insight of Chiang’s son Chiang Ching-kuo when
he finally allowed the democratization of Taiwan in the 1980s.) This
unbending view is at least in part to do with the black-and-white
view of moral behaviour bequeathed by Confucianism.62 But it is also
attributable to the Bolshevik influence, equally unbending, on the
Nationalists and the Communists when they were under Soviet
tutelage in the mid-1920s. In other words, there was no dominant and
unchangeable ‘Chinese culture’ which forced the parties into view-
ing politics as a zero-sum game. Instead, historical circumstance and
the luck of the draw as to which foreign advisers they took on led to that particular path.

What about Chiang's adoption of Sun's third great principle, 'socialism', or 'people's livelihood'? This, rightly, has been regarded as one of the great failures of the Nationalist government. This was not because of a lack of intention. CCP writing of the time argued that the 'feudal' values of the Nationalists and their lackeys meant that they had no concern for the misery and deprivation in the rural areas of China in particular. A fairer assessment, though, is perhaps that the Nationalist government recognized the scale of its task but never found adequate ways to deal with it. The government never managed to create a strong revenue base from which to pay for reforms. A vicious circle was created in the countryside, in which state-building was hampered by corruption caused in part by self-defeating methods of tax collection. The Nationalists had also, throughout the 1920s, alienated many people by taking over local temples and shrines and forcibly secularizing them, turning them into party offices or schools, so as to press on the people the need for anti-religious, progressive reform. Unlike the Japanese state, which made state religion, Shinto, an integral part of the nationalism it had created, the modernizing Chinese vision, whether the Nationalist or Communist one, did not. The Nationalists had proposals for reform in the countryside, but they were never sufficient for the massive task they faced, and they started by alienating many who might have supported them through their own high-handed attitude as much as the details of their policy.

Things were different, though, in the cities, where the new regime did have more impact. The 'developmental state' created new government buildings in Nanjing, metalled roads, power stations, and so forth. The regime also took advantage of populist nationalist movements where it could, supporting the National Products Movement, through which Chinese manufacturers since the early twentieth century had been encouraging consumers to favour Chinese-made goods in preference to foreign ones, even if the latter were cheaper or of higher quality. For the first few years of the regime, in the cities at least, it was perfectly possible to find people
who were prepared to give Chiang’s regime the benefit of the doubt. If it was unstable and inclined to corruption, it was also nationalistic and progressive in language and intent. It was not, in the late 1920s, clear that the New Culture Movement had been brought to a halt because of the installation of the regime in Nanjing. Published discussion certainly continued to talk about China’s future in the context of internationalism and anti-imperialism. The revolution, it was clear, was not yet finished. The increasingly menacing power on the other side of the Sea of Japan, though, would be largely responsible for deciding whether it would ever be finished – or, at least, whether it would be finished under the Nationalists.